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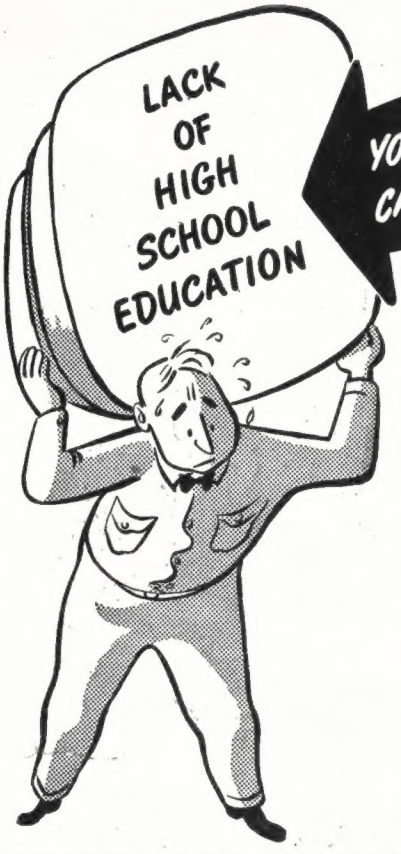

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Vol. XXXI, No. 2 EVERY STORY BRAND NEW October, 1946

A Complete Painted Post Novelet

RED ROPE

By TOM GUNN

The map to a fabulously rich gold mine—and the roaring raids of rustlers—combine to provide Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts with plenty of six-gun work to do! 9

Other Full-Length Novelets

SON OF A GUNMAN ..... Larry A. Harris 42
Escaping the fate that has overtaken his crooked pards, the Kid battles to work out his own redemption—in gun smoke!

RENEGADE RANCHER ..... Gunnison Steele 78
Torch Malone, embittered by the loss of his ranch and his cattle, takes a whirl at the owlhoot to see what's on the other side of the fence!

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When trouble breaks out in Coyoteville, Sheriff Arnold goes into action

NEIGHBORS OF POVERTY RANGE ..... Roger Rhodes 71
The feud between Higgins and Whorton goes on for years, until—

and

THE HOME CORRAL ..... Doc Long Trail 6
An entertaining and informative department for readers

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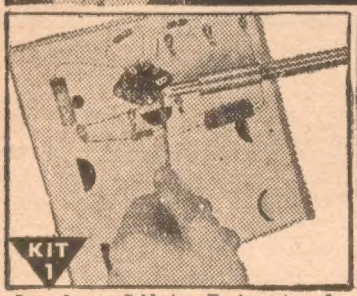

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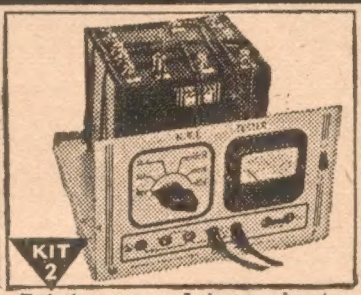

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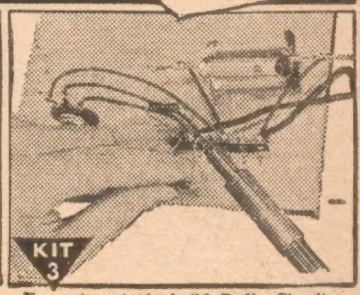

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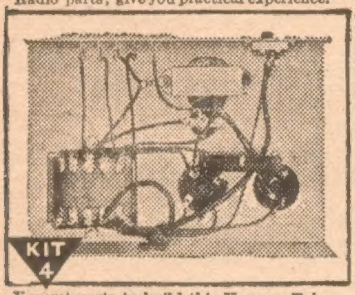

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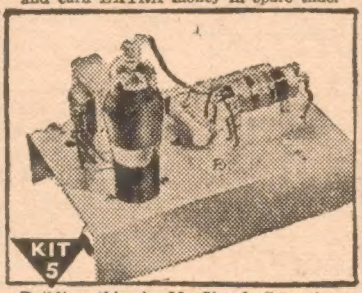

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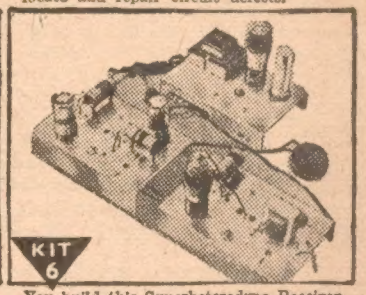

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DOC LONG TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! Blizzards lashed the East, floods raged in the North and gales that lashed both Coasts brought messages of distress from ships at sea. But down on the Southwestern desert, where I camped last winter, the warm sun shone from dewless dawn and I lazed around bare-waisted. Folks in the hurrying, crowded cities counted their money while I counted my blessings and tanned my hide.

But yonder on the roaring highway were signs of the rushing, changing world. A great, new population was pouring out West. In one month 142,119 vehicles carrying nearly a half-million passengers passed the border stations into California. In the same time the year before, only 58,399 vehicles came with 218,343 passengers.

But California wasn't getting all the newcomers. Into green, lovely Oregon other thousands came, in ten times the number of war workers that left shipyards and such when peace came. While down even in Mexico sombreroed hombres were rushing to finish the new El Paso-to-Mexico City highway.

In Arizona, old CCC barracks were being fixed up for home-hunting families and 500 government trailers were brought into Phoenix to house returning veterans.

History Is on the March!

All through the West deserted Army camps were being took over and converted into home centers. It meant unwinding a bed-awful snarl of red tape. But still this housing shortage got worse as the pilgrims came. It made all the pioneer land rushes shrink into plumb insignificant pasears.

Yessir, folks, history is on the march out West. Among other things, a crop of new historians will be needed to keep track of the changes.

You know, early Western history was pretty badly neglected. It was told only in fragments. That's why I was glad at the news recently that a library of authentic Western history was started—and of all places, at Princeton University in New Jersey!

The reason for that location is that the founder, a man named Philip Rollins, graduated from Princeton way back in 1889. He spent thousands of dollars and 25 years of work in collecting 3000 books about the early West.

The books cover a mighty wide range. They include records of exploration, from the Lewis & Clark Expedition to the breaking of the covered wagon trails. There are diaries of early travelers, accounts of Indian wars and records of gold rushes and range feuds.

This man Rollins knows his West. He came West when he was only 5. He helped herd a band of 2000 cattle from San Antonio, Texas to Miles City, Montana, when he was only 10. He was initiated into the Cheyenne Indian tribe when he was 9. From all that material he had accumulated, says Rollins, somebody can write a masterpiece of Western history.

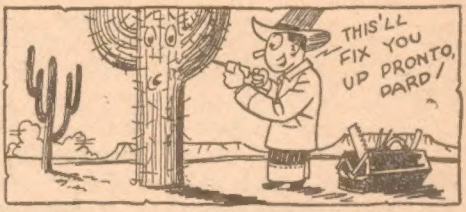
Epics of Accomplishment

It wasn't all gun-fighting out West, but there were epics of genuine accomplishment just as exciting. This ex-cowboy Rollins invites Hollywood to dig into his library and make some thrillers based on facts and good sense. It riles him up the way history is twisted and messed up in the movies.

Anyhow, it's a great job he's done and The Home Corral hereby extends thanks and congratulations.

Here's something interesting, specially to you Home Corralers that are heading West or aim to. Last time I roamed through Arizona's giant cactus (sahuaro) regions I observed that some mysterious blight was killing off those plants, as high and thick through as telephone poles.

Now comes a plant doctor named J. G. Brown from Arizona's College of Agriculture who has located the trouble—a bacterial rot. What's more, he's curing it. What with?



This new wonder drug, penicillin! He kills the germ by applying the drug direct to the affected spot. The cure has worked in every case during the past two years.

(Continued on page 90)

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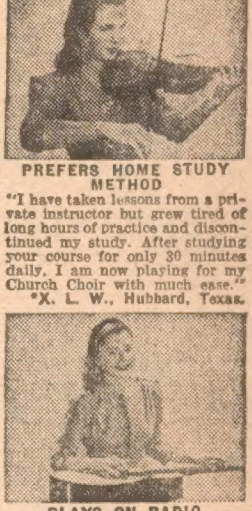

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Look at the diagram. The first note on the music is "C". Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "C" on the piano. Find the other notes the same way. Now strike the notes as indicated and you'll be playing the melody of the famous patriotic hymn "America." Easy as A-B-C, isn't it?

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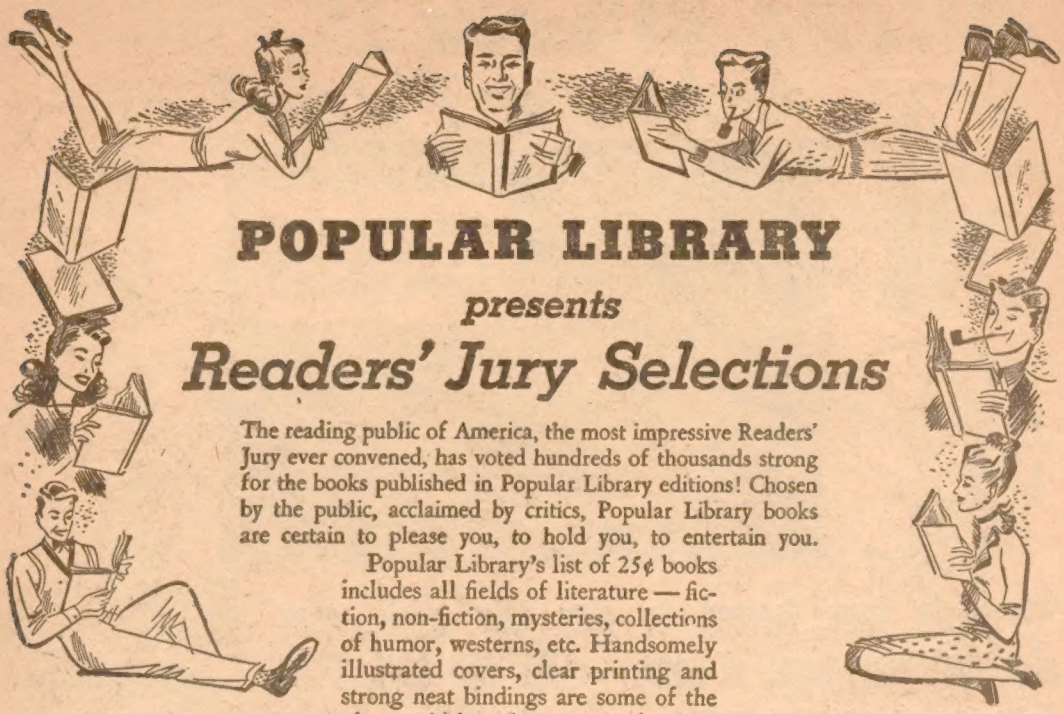

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TROUBLE SHOOTER.....*by Ernest Haycox*
BUCKY FOLLOWS A COLD TRAIL.....*by William MacLeod Raine*

The ladder crashed down, Dictionary with it

RED ROPE

By TOM GUNN

The map to a fabulously rich lost mine—and the roaring raids of rustlers—combine to provide Sheriff Blue Steele and his deputy Shorty Watts with plenty of six-gun chores!

CHAPTER I

Arizona Legend

THE stranger knew that everybody was sizing him up, mulling over anything he said and trying to keep track of his movements. For Painted Post was suspicious of newcomers. As a border cowtown, it had good reason to be. Badmen from everywhere had tried every hook and crook to get control there and throughout Indian County. Forming the Mexican boundary, as it did, it offered the lawless breed tempting advantages. So far they had been thwarted by Sheriff Blue Steele, most famous lawman in the Southwest.

Herb Hooper, the man said his name was. He rented a room upstairs over "Thimble Jack's" Saloon and rode out of town every morning, returning at night. He wasn't a talker and didn't explain his business. But

after a week of it, speculation as to who he was and what he was doing became a leading topic.

One gusty evening, when Hooper returned and paused at the bar for a pickup before crossing to Chow Now's for supper, Deputy Sheriff "Shorty" Watts' curiosity passed the point of politeness.

The five-foot-two redhead hooked an elbow on the bar and a boot on the foot-rail.

"Mister, this country is hard up for roundup hands," he began.

Hooper's cloudy blue eyes looked down on the freckled, half-pint deputy with smiling toleration.

"Not looking for work, thanks," he replied.

"Spotted a job elsewhere?" persisted Shorty.

The stranger smoothed the curled brim of his expensive Stetson, eying his reflection in the back-mirror.

"Got a job."

"Yeah?" The one word expressed surprise, interest—even a shade of doubt.

"A survey job," Hooper added.

"Don't see yuh luggin' no survey tools, such as them three-legged things surveyors peek through."

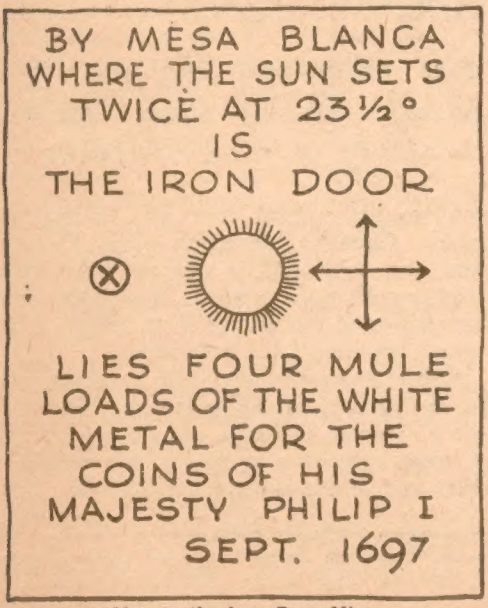
Hooper twirled a whisky glass with long, smooth fingers.

"Not a land survey. A grass survey."

Shorty blinked his pale lashes.

"Grass survey? That's a new one on me. What for?"

"To find out how many cows can be grazed on the desert," the other replied patronizingly, as though explaining to a child.



Map to the Iron Door Mine

"Then youh're a guv-ment man, huh?"

A trace of annoyance crept into Hooper's manner as he shook his head.

"Hired by Arizona Territory, mebbe?" pried the unabashed Shorty.

HOOPER faced him, cloudy eyes inscrutible as turquoise.

"Let's say I'm self-employed. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Figgerin' to buy out somebody?"

Hooper forced a patient smile.

"I'll buy a drink."

"No, thanks." Shorty paused, running out of questions. "Seems yuh ain't announcin' yore bizness from the housetops, mister."

Hooper seized this opportunity to shift the talk to less personal grounds.

"Speaking of housetops," he said, now addressing himself to the slick-haired, sad-eyed Thimble Jack, "there's a loose sheet of roofing over my room."

"Tain't important," the bartender said as he swiped at a fly and missed. "Hardly ever rains here."

"Noisy when the wind blows. Keeps a man awake."

"That's a hoss of another collar," Thimble Jack said politely. "Always aim to please hotel guests. Hey, you, Dictionary!"

A thin, oldish man shuffled dutifully from the backroom. "Dictionary" Smith was the town handyman.

"Gent says the danged tin roof clatters all night, is wreckin' his slumber. What for do I pay you twenty a month and all the likker you can swipe?"

Dictionary salaamed with exaggerated humility.

"The Great White Father speaks," said he. "Mine not to reason why, mine but to do and die."

"Don't go to all that trouble," Hooper laughed. "Just pry up that sheet of roofing over my bed and nail it down solid."

Dictionary pattered into the back room, emerging with hammer and ladder. Herb Hooper slipped him a silver dollar as he held the batwing doors open while Dictionary dragged the ladder outdoors. Then, to escape Shorty's further inquiries, he angled across to the Chinese lunch counter.

Dictionary pried and whanged the loose sheet of roofing till about dark. There came an abrupt cessation in the racket. Soon he scuttled down the ladder and burst into the saloon. Breathless and excited, he waved a yellowed roll of paper over his head.

"Shades o' Midas!" he cried. "I'm a rich man!"

Guns thundered as Steele and Shorty fought the confused raiders

By now a crowd was present. Everyone stared as the wizened little handyman spread the sheet open under the hanging kerosene lamp. His watery, faded eyes gleamed.

"Eureka!" he shrilled. "A treasure map! It locates the long-lost Mine with the Iron Door!"

The crowd was jolted. Dictionary, as a rule, wasn't taken very seriously. But the Mine with the Iron Door was Arizona's greatest legend of hidden riches. Mere mention of it was enough to excite men anywhere.

According to the tale, early Spanish explorers had cached a vast hoard of silver ingots in this mine, were later massacred by Indians and records of their wealth destroyed. Adventurers ever since had sought the treasure. The only clue to its whereabouts was a vague belief that it was hidden south of the old Apache Trail, near the international boundary. In an underground vault sealed by a massive iron door.

Sheriff Blue Steele was first to react to Dictionary's sensational announcement. He strode across the room, seized the map and rolled it into a tight cylinder. Such a coveted thing as a treasure map put its possessor in serious danger.

"I come onto it while—" Dictionary started to say.

"Time enough to tell where you found it," the Sheriff interrupted. "The thing now is to get this into safe-keeping, pronto."

Nobody protested the decision. Steele was a lean, bronzed six-footer with a manner of authority. His gray eyes could be as hard as granite even when his voice was deceptively soft. He ruled the borderland with an absoluteness that made him both the most hated and most admired character in the Territory. Luckless scoundrels who had challenged his authority had learned that Steele was lightning-fast with the twin Colts that hung from his single or buscadero belt.

Under desert clods lay many an unmourned gunhand who had tried to beat his double draw.

STEELE thrust the rolled map into Shorty's hands.

"Nearest thing we've got to a safety deposit box is the jail. Lock this up, segundo," he ordered.

"Yuh darn tootin'!"

Impressed by the importance of his errand, the little deputy pushed through the group and out of the saloon. At the doorway he collided with Herb Hooper, returning from supper.

Had the stranger been in earshot when Dictionary babbled the news of his find? Those present had reason to wonder afterward. There was another incident, hardly noticed at the moment, that loomed important later. "Magpie" Stevens, gabby, grizzled stage driver, craned his long neck for a look at the map just as Steele seized it. As Shorty left by the front, Magpie catfooted into the backroom. And, as it turned out soon afterward, he climbed out through a rear window into the dark night.

Only a matter of seconds after Shorty left came his blurted, hurt yelp. Followed by a struggling commotion that culminated in the thudding roar of his .45. One shot, then two more, triggered fast.

SHERIFF BLUE STEELE

The last shot fetched an anguished yell: "Don't shoot, don't shoot! I'm hit!"

It came from Magpie. He ran around the side of the two-story saloon and hotel, lurched into the place from the front. Blood streamed from a bullet rip in his left sleeve.

"Quick, Doc!" he howled.

His appeal was made to a sharp-nosed man with pointed beard and flashing pince-nez glasses. Doc Crabtree skittered upstairs and came down with his black satchel. Laying Magpie's skinny forearm on the bar he ripped open the sleeve with a scalpel.

"I'm crippled for life!" moaned Magpie. "Won't ever hold ribbons on a six-hoss team ag'in!"

"Fuddle-duddle!" snorted the Doc with a glance at the wound. "It's just a scratch!

Bullet glanced off your thick hide, you lucky old buzzard!"

Magpie's panic left him.

"Lucky, am I?" He was mad now. "This here is a new ten-dollar shirt yuh ruint for me!"

Shorty swayed back into the saloon, gripping his smoking six-gun. He looked glassy-eyed and dazed. Blood from a cut in his scalp trickled down one side of his face.

"Sheriff!" he croaked feebly. "Somebody walloped me! The map, it's—it's gone!"

"Don't look at me!" yammered Magpie. "I never done it! Yore too blamed impulsive with a gun!"

Here was a moment in which Judge John Bertram saw need to assert himself. As owner of T Bar T, biggest spread in Indian County and its leading citizen, he harrumped the rest into silence. He was a stocky, white-haired man with a red face and fierce, jutting brows. He gave voice to what others were thinking at that moment.

"Where in thunderation is that mysterious stranger?"

CHAPTER II

Painted Rat

STEELE wondered about the stranger, too. But he didn't tarry to say so. As the judge spoke, he rushed outside. He saw a shadowy figure lurking at the edge of the platform sidewalk. He whiplashed a command.

"Inside, Hooper! And keep your hands showing!"

With palms turned forward in surrender, the man came toward him.

"I was ducking loose lead, that's all." His voice was steady. "What happened?"

Steele motioned him into the saloon with a Colt muzzle.

"Join our sociable little group, amigo," he said tautly.

Inside the brightly-lighted saloon, Hooper's cloudy eyes slitted. He saw suspicion, hostility in the ring of faces. He drew himself up tall. But not tall enough to seem impressive beside the hard, erect sheriff.

"Search him, Judge," Steele said, keeping a Colt in the flat of one hand.

Hooper flushed and scowled, then fought back resentment and shrugged with good-natured compliance as he held arms out from his sides.

"What you expect to find on me?" he asked mildly.

Bertram frisked him from head to foot.

"No map on this gazabo," he reported.

"You're next, Magpie," Steele said tersely.

The old stage driver spluttered a protest. But Bertram pushed him against the bar and searched him.

"Shut up!" he rumbled as he turned Magpie's pockets inside out. "You got some tall explainin' to do as is."

"I heered him shinny out through the back window," said Thimble Jack.

"Yup, I did exackly that!" blustered Magpie. "Because the back door was bolted! And I had a reason—a plum personal reason—for gettin' outside in a hurry." He leveled an accusing glare at Shorty. "Whereupon I got shot by that ignerant whippersnapper."

The double search did not produce the missing map. Doc Crabtree shooed Shorty to a chair by the corner card table. The little deputy grimaced as the Doc daubed his scalp gash with stinging iodine.

"Who hit you?" Steele asked.

"Don't even know what I got hit with!" Shorty gritted through set teeth.

"Quite a wallop," said the Doc. "Lucky he had his hat on, and also the hardest head in this vicinity. Now set tight, young feller, while I take coupla stitches."

Judge Bertram faced Steele with a helpless gesture.

"Good Godfrey, now what?" he boomed.

Steele's penetrating gaze flicked the faces around him but it told him nothing. It lighted and lingered on Dictionary.

"How'd yuh get hold of that map?"

Dictionary wagged his head unhappily.

"Should of left it where I diskivered it."

"Where?"

"On the roof. Under that loose sheet of roofing."

"A fake, I bet," scoffed Thimble Jack. "Most finds of that sort are. How'd it ever git up there?"

"Yuh're the old settler hereabouts, Judge," Steele said to Betram. "You was here when this place was built."

"A party called Sidewinder Selby hammered together this roosting shed about fifteen year back," the judge said.

"Sidewinder Selby?" Steele pounced on the name. "He was released from Yuma Prison last month. Served a ten-year stretch for a shooting over Tucson way."

Herb Hooper looked disinterested.

"All right with you if I go on upstairs and

turn in now, Sheriff?" he asked.

The Sheriff nodded. . . .

The Iron Door excitement died down as other events crowded in. The fall was a busy time on the desert rangeland. It was roundup time among the far-scattered ranches. It had been a good year and smaller outfits—Circle 7, Bar 2, Box L and others—had thrown in with T Bar T for a herd drive north to Cottonwood, the shipping point.

Steele and Shorty rode far and long. The sheriff had been chosen to settle numerous disputes that arose among mixed brands. A lot of trouble was headed off that way. Moreover, a watchful eye discouraged rustling attempts.

UP FROM T Bar T, past the rimrock rise that separated Bertram's range from McCall's Box L, moved the herd, a full five hundred head. To Magpie's blasphemous annoyance, his stage road was trampled deep.

"Dust was deep enough before!" he complained. "Lately I've et so much I've got brick-lined insides."

"Fire brick, I trust," quipped Dictionary. "Because that last barrel of distilled delight that Jack got is sure combustible."

"You're one that ought to know," retorted Magpie.

The little handyman had been in a mildly salubrious state since his loss of the map. A ne'er-do-well to whom the prospect of sudden wealth loomed large, he tried to drown his disappointmnt. He never expected to see his find again.

But it turned up in surprising fashion about a week later.

Steele and Shorty, in town overnight during their long-riding, were at breakfast at Chow Now's. The old Chinese idolized Steele and was in the habit of taking his problems to the sheriff.

As they ate, Chow Now fetched a crumpled paper from his woodbox and spread it on the counter.

"What sayum, Sheliff?" he inquired midly.

The gray eyes stabbed his wrinkled, guileless face.

"Old-timer, where'd yuh get this?"

"Wind blowum my woodpile. Law paper? You losum?"

Shorty's eyes popped and he choked on a mouthful of flapjack.

"Migosh, Sheriff," he gurgled, when he could speak. "Dictionary's map, the map to the Iron Door Mine!"

Steele's sharp eyes scanned it swiftly. The ink was faded, the lettering nearly illegible. But one cryptic phrase leaped up at them both: "Where the sun sets twice!"

And a place-name, Mesa Blanca.

"Where's Mesa Blanca?" Shorty asked. "Never heard of it. Figgered I knowed about every landmark on the Arizona border."

Steele was thinking of something else.

"You let on as how this was snatched from you the night you were hit, segundo."

"That's right."

"Real sure it didn't blow out of your hand?"

"All I know for shore is that I was purty fuzzy from that wallop on the head."

"But not too fuzzy to shoot. Too straight for Magpie's comfort. Also, you didn't see who hit you."

"Just what're yuh drivin' at, Sheriff?" Shorty demanded.

"Some folks half-suspect that you pulled a dodge to get hold of the map for yourself."

"Well, they'll know now that I didn't!" Shorty declared. "Mebbe I'm a dunderhead, but I ain't a—"

"Sure you're not. That's what makes this a lucky find."

Thanking Chow Now, Steele rolled the map in one hand and rose. They crossed to the saloon. Dictionary was on the tall ladder, in front. Before coming to Painted Post he had been a barn-dauber or painter of wayside patent medicine signs. Now he was busy re-lettering the sun-baked hotel sign with bright red paint.

"Better call the little jigger down, Sheriff. He'd tumble flat if he sees we got his map."

As the little deputy spoke, Herb Hooper emerged from the saloon. It was the time of day for him to go for his horse up at the corral, past the jail office. Instead, he stopped short. He seemed to be groping for something to say, for some excuse for his clinging interest, in that crinkly cylinder in Steele's hand.

"Quiet town," he blurted. "Not a very exciting job, since the other night."

"Wait'll payday brings in thirsty cowhands," Steele said tersely.

"In case yuh're still here then," Shorty added pointedly. "About done countin' grassblades?"

"About," Hooper said, cloudy eyes still on the map.

"How much territory your survey take in?" Steele asked casually.

"All your bailiwick. And beyond."

"Far as Los Pasos?"

"Why do you ask?" Hooper shot at him.

"Sighted you ridin' T Bar T's east range

two-three days back," Steele drawled. "Ridin' with somebody not from Painted Post, not from Judge Bertram's outfit."

"Is it unlawful assembly when two men ride together in these parts?"

"Not unlawful," spoke up Shorty. "But unhealthy. If one or both is from that crook colony, Los Pasos. Indian County folks don't pal around with Paseños, mister."

IT MIGHT have been awkward to explain. It would have been more awkward if he did not. They waited for Hooper's answer. It came—a wholly unexpected one. His blue eyes went smoky and he whipped his revolver from holster with savage suddenness.

"So you doublecrossers worked that sandy in cahoots the other night, eh?" he snarled. "Glue your back to the wall there, Steele.

DEPUTY SHORTY WATTS

You grab the map, Torchy. Then march for the corral, in front of me. One funny move from either of you and the segundo'll leak flapjacks."

Steele didn't bat an eyelash. He hooked thumbs in the armholes of his vest, passive and unresistant.

"Do like the man says," he told Shorty.

Simmering with rage, the little deputy obeyed and grudgingly started. He deliberately passed under Dictionary's ladder, saying loudly:

"Yuh'll pack lead before yuh pack off Iron Door silver, mister."

Hooper was ignorant of the handyman's presence until a bucket of red paint plummeted down. In a brief instant of awareness he saw it coming and tried to dodge.

He didn't quite succeed. The paint bucket struck his upraised left arm a glancing blow. It spattered him from shoulder to fingertips. He cursed, kicked the ladder and it crashed down, Dictionary with it.

The confusion might have given Steele an opportunity. But the ladder—and Dictionary—landed between him and Hooper. He went to Dictionary's aid as Hooper pressed revolver muzzle to Shorty's back.

"Keep going, Torchy," Hooper gritted. "I mean business!"

They reached the corral where he forced Shorty to saddle up his spotty roan. On the saddle rack, with portions of stage harness, were Steele's saddle and Shorty's. Whipping out a knife, Hooper whacked off the latigo straps.

"Neither of you'll take to my trail without saddle cinches," he said with a mocking grin. "Now let down the gate bars and—adios, you nosy little squirt!"

Shorty gritted his teeth helplessly as Hooper spurred past. This important occasion had found the little deupty unarmed. He had left his .45 in the jail office, where he and Steele slept. He adjusted the gate bars before the Sheriff's prized steel-dust gelding and his own black-and-white pinto could make a getaway, then returned sizzling mad to Thimble Jack's.

Dictionary, pale and shaken, was propped on a bench in front asking weakly for whisky. His face was bruised and Doc Crabtree was fingering the oldster's bony shoulders.

"Fractured collar bone," the Doc announced.

Thimble Jack groaned as though the broken bone were his own.

"Leavin' me shy of help in the busiest season!"

Steele was rolling a smoke, placid and steady.

"First time I ever seen them Colts of yores glued inside their holsters, Sheriff!" Shorty blatted accusingly.

"I—I calculated that droppin' the paint would give you a good opportunity," breathed Dictionary. "I'd heerd no man ever got the drop on the Sheriff of Painted Post. Once again fortune has slipped through my fingers. Alas!"

"Still time to patch our latigos and round up that hellaroo, Sheriff," piped Shorty.

Steele lighted his cigarette unhurriedly.

"Ever heard how's the best way to exterminate rats, segundo?"

"Danged if I savvy that!"

"Daub one with paint. Give him time to

reach his hole."

Steele ignored Doc Crabtree's disdainful snort. He was oblivious, or tried to be, of Dictionary's mild criticism and Shorty's more candid one. Whatever his purpose, he was in no hurry to carry it out.

But his reputation for courage and fast shooting had suffered severely, in the regard of his fellow townsmen. And Herb Hooper would make no secret of his coup. News of the humiliating incident was bound to spread.

CHAPTER III

The Big Boss

HOOPER soon learned that wet red paint was about as hard to be rid of as his shadow. Even when he dismounted and wiped his smeared hand on dry grass, the stuff persisted in dribbling down his soaked sleeve. He got it on everything he touched, even when he reached Los Pasos and tied his horse in front of the notorious Tecolote Club.

He batted open the swinging doors with an elbow, swerved to the bar to lay hold of a soggy towel and wrapped his hand with it as he passed the early-morning idleness of the gambling tables and through an archway into a rear room fitted up as an office.

At a roll-top desk, chewing on a cold cigar, was hunched a fat-necked man with a huge diamond on his pudgy right hand.

He swung around with a dark scowl, then arched his heavy brows with surprised recognition on seeing his unannounced visitor.

"Watsa trouble?" he greeted as heavy-lidded eyes flicked to the red paint.

"Don't ever walk under a ladder, Joe," Hooper said. "Bad luck, specially when there's a careless painter on it."

Joe Angiola leaned back and rolled the unlighted cigar from one mouth corner to the other.

"Watsa score?" he grunted.

"It was slow going, but I put it over," bragged Hooper, mopping at paint with the towel.

"Put over a can of paint, huh?"

Hooper brushed aside that cynical comment.

"Here's how I worked it, Joe. For awhile I left the map in my room, careless-like. Figured somebody would snoop around and take the bait. But no luck."

"Too honest, then Painted Posters."

"My room was next to the roof. Nails showed through, nails from the metal roofing. I hit on a bright idea. I pushed 'em up, loosening a sheet of it, then poked the map up there where the town simpleton found it while fixing the roof."

Joe Angiola made an impatient gesture with the frayed cigar.

"Too windy, you. Castro tells me that, after him and you meet up in the Caliente Hills."

"It worked. But something went wrong. The map was stolen. Somebody jumped that redheaded deputy in the dark and grabbed it. So he claimed, anyhow."

"I make that map so good it fool everybody," Joe Angiola crooned. "Only I not so sure who was King of Spain."

"Sure, Joe, it was a fine job. But Steele didn't go gallivanting in search of the Iron Door, as I expected. He still stuck around the cattle drive, blast him. So I had to rush things and this morning the chance came."

Joe rolled his head on his thick shoulders and spread out his hands.

"Talk, talk, talk. What you do then, huh?" he grunted at Hooper.

"Saw Steele with the map on him. Persuaded him to give it up." Hooper flung the soiled towel in a corner and patted his holster.

Joe Angiola thrust out his heavy underlip contemptuously.

"You gun Steele? You?"

"I out-drawed him."

"Blah!"

"You don't believe me?"

Angiola's fat eyelids slitted half-shut. He was no fool.

"Steele let you, mebbe. Why? Map is simple, like A-B-C. Why you take big risk to get map back, Steele wonder. He smells rat, you bet. Knows map is come-on to get him out of way. Now you no more use to Joe, same as map. Blah, get out!"

Herb Hooper turned sickly white. Angiola was as cold as a snake and as merciless. Henchmen who failed him seldom lived long to regret it.

"But Joe, listen—" he croaked strickenly.

The Tecolote bartender rushed into the boss' office.

"Here comes Painted Post." He gave the warning in a hushed whisper. "Steele and the redheaded cull."

"Get out!" Angiola barked at Hooper.

DESPERATE, Hooper looked about him wildly as Angiola, with greater presence of mind, called out through the curtained archway:

"Hey, you bums! Get horse in front, quick! Out of sight somewhere!"

Two hangers-on leaped to obey. The spotty roan was whisked from the tie-rack, down an adobe-walled lane and into a screening thicket.

Herb Hooper slid out the back door of Joe Angiola's office and took cover behind a tier of empty barrels. Just as the Tecolote's front doors swung open and Steele and Shorty entered.

Back in Painted Post that morning, Steele wrapped himself in thoughtful silence while Shorty riveted new latigos on his saddle and the Sheriff's When he finished, Steele heeled a cigarette butt in the dust and inched cartridge-heavy buscadero belt higher on his lean hips.

"Now let's go rat-hunting, segundo."

Why he hadn't made a chase of it, Shorty couldn't imagine. It seemed futile and belated to jog out of town now. The Sheriff's strange inaction preyed on his mind as they went north along the stage road.

Never before had doubts of Steele entered his head. He was devoted and loyal and they had seen stormy times together. Times in which their lives depended on fast, sure teamwork. Was the sheriff slowing down? Had he lost his fighting nerve?

Shorty tried to banish his wavering regard with hurried talk about something else.

"I've got everything figgered out, Sheriff," he chattered. "I figger Hooper is really Sidewinder Selby and he stashed the map on the hotel roof. Hid it there for safekeeping when he built the place."

"Not a very safe place if the hotel had burned," Steele commented.

"Well, he planned to come back to it sooner. But he got in that shootin' mess in Tucson and couldn't come back till his recent release."

"How old would you say Hooper is?"

"Oh, thirty-two or three."

"Then he was an unshaved brat when he built the Painted Post Hotel. Fifteen years ago it was, Judge Bertram said."

Shorty's brow crinkled with the effort of subtracting fifteen from thirty-two. That would have made Selby alias Hooper only seventeen at the time. That didn't tally.

"Also," Steele observed mildly, "if Hooper is Selby, why didn't he get the map himself instead of letting it fall into Dictionary's hands?"

Shorty's logic was smashed to smithereens. He gave up.

"Dang it all!" he sputtered. "You always whiff out my bright ideas, Sheriff."

The ghost of a smile touched Steele's thin lips. They were at the Caliente ford now. But instead of crossing, and riding on toward Box L Springs, as Shorty had expected, the sheriff reined downriver.

"Hey, we're headin' for Los Pasos," cried the little deputy.

"That's right, segundo. To prove that your ideas ain't all whiffers."

"Thanks! But how come?"

Steele tilted his hat against the strong sweep of wind.

"You hinted that the hombre Hooper rode with the other day was a paseño. A pretty smart guess. Hooper's face showed it when you said that."

Shorty brightened a little.

"All right, then, s'pose he did? How yuh aim to find out by going to Los Pasos now?"

"Red rope, segundo."

"Now yuh're talkin' in riddles agin, Sheriff. But remember, we ain't welcome in Los Pasos. Questions won't git us nowhere."

"The right questions might."

That ended talk for awhile. It was plain that the sheriff wasn't in a communicative mood. Shorty took refuge in brooding silence and heart-heavy resentment of that unmet challenge in which Herb Hooper had flouted them both.

Once a lawman started slipping. . . .

SEVERAL hours later Steele's fingers seemed less nimble than usual as he knotted the gelding's macarty to the Tecolote tie-rack. Shorty noticed his clumsiness with new agitation. Was this a further sign of the sheriff's flagging energy? A sorry day it would be when the need for quick triggering came, with that fumbling touch on a Colt.

What Shorty didn't notice was that Steele ran a forefinger along the underside of the smooth-worn pole where Tecolote visitors tied their mounts. As though in search of some mark or stain.

Shorty didn't notice that because he flung sharp looks up and down the street. He hoped to see Herb Hooper. He packed a grudge that he craved to settle.

Shorty wore his .45 now and he wanted action. Painted Post prestige was in bad need of a build-up.

But he didn't see his man and Steele was saying:

"Ever occur to you, segundo, that since Joe Angiola became the main squeeze around

here that we've plum neglected to pay our respects?"

"I ain't got no respect for him or anybody else in this flea-bit town!" bristled Shorty. "What's more, I'd say this is a heck of a time tuh go makin' sociable calls!"

"We're rat-hunting, segundo. Remember?"

Steele smiled. But his eyes were serious. The rock-gray was flecked with metallic glints.

"Okay," Shorty said glumly.

Sullen stares greeted them as they entered the hangout, followed them into Angiola's office. Steele knew instantly that word of their coming had preceded them. He knew it by Angiola's oily smile and ready greeting.

"Howdy, boys. Glad to see. No get around moch, me. Dis joint keep ol' Joe tied up, you bet."

"Sure, your business needs watching," Steele replied with smooth pleasantness that took the edge off of whatever double meaning was hidden in his words. He shook his head as the other extended an open box of cigars. He pulled out makings instead.

The act of rolling a smoke gave him opportunity to inventory the room with lowered eyes. On a chair back he saw a bright red smear. In a dusty corner beside the desk was a crumpled bar towel, similarly stained. As he twirled the brown paper into a cylinder, the tip of his right forefinger bore that same telltale paint smear. The finger that had explored the tie-rack.

He struck a match.

"Ever hear of a place called Mesa Blanca, Joe?" he asked suddenly.

Shorty picked up his ears. How could the Tecolote boss know a landmark that they did not?"

"I no get around moch," Angiola repeated.

Steele leaned an arm on the chair back and lowered his voice confidentially.

"Mesa Blanca. That means White Hill in Spanish."

"Yeah, I savvy. Why you ask ol' Joe?"

"Only place of such description anywhere around here is that pumice butte down toward Hourglass Canyon. The one we call the Devil's Doorknob. You reckon, back in Spanish days, that the Devil's Doorknob was called Mesa Blanca, Joe?"

Angiola's coarse face was expressionless. It was a poker face.

"Could be, awright," he nodded solemnly. "I ask some of the boys, huh?"

"No, no," Steele said hastily. "Just forget it, Joe."

Shorty listened with increasing wonder. Why was the Sheriff trying to make Angiola think that they were hunting for the Iron Door treasure?

Steele switched the talk to small gossip. It didn't sound like him. He wasn't a word-waster. It didn't last long. In a few minutes they took their leave. In saddle, Steele led the way south. Safely out of earshot of the small, ugly houses that fringed the street, Shorty spoke.

"Now what in creation did we accomplish with all that chin music, Sheriff?" he piped up.

"We found that Hooper was in Los Pasos ahead of us, segundo," Steele said complacently. "Shouldn't wonder but what there's a spotty roan in the vicinity right now."

"S'pose we take a look-see."

"No. Let our rat go to the baited trap."

"Another riddle. What trap?"

"Indian County beef."

"So that's it, huh? Migosh, then why ain't we tootlin' for Box L Springs?"

"That's our job, muy pronto. After convincing Los Pasos that we're bound in the opposite direction. To Hourglass Canyon and the Devil's Doorknob."

CHAPTER IV

Flashing Six-Guns

AS SOON as Steele and Shorty had left Angiola's office, Herb Hooper slipped back inside.

"You see, Joe?" he crowed. "My stunt worked! Steele bit, hook, line and sinker. You were all wrong. Now's our chance, tonight. With a dozen good men I can tackle that herd and have it over the Line in Mexico by morning."

The big boss chewed his cigar.

"Why Steele come here? You so smart, tell me that."

"For information."

"Blah!"

"Well, that Mesa Blanca thing had him guessing. Just like we wanted. If we'd named a well-known location, he'd have had time to look it over and get back to guarding the trail herd. In which case I'd have had a tough time getting anybody to make the raid. Steele's got folks buffaloed in this country. Now how about it, Joe? Do we clean up tonight or don't we?"

Angiola grunted as he lifted his bulk out of his chair and squatted in front of his safe, his fat body concealing the combination as he twirled the knob. He flung out a sheaf of bills.

"Five hundred expense money," he said.

Hooper clamped onto it.

"But Joe, this is in Mex pesos!"

"You and your mob stay in Mexico. Don't show up here till I send word. Get that?"

Hooper pocketed the wad. Nobody could get ahead of Joe Angiola. Little use would "dobey" dollars be to him if he failed and fled anywhere in the States.

"I'll be back for my cut after you collect from your Sonora friends, Joe," he said.

He swaggered into the front of the Tecolote, called some hard-faced men to the bar and engaged in low, earnest talk with them.

Less than an hour later, from a distant rise, Steel saw a knot of riders, a dozen or so, leave Los Pasos. They went north.

"They'll take the Robles cutoff trail," he told Shorty. Eager certainly was in his manner.

"We can waylay 'em in the Caliente Hills," Shorty exclaimed enthusiastically.

"On what excuse? Can't gun men for bad intentions, segundo."

"Reckon that's right," Shorty agreed reluctantly. "I'm a little over-anxious to tangle horns with Mister Hooper."

"I'd like some of the same, segundo. But our job right now is to wise up Judge Bertram. Sudden."

They rode hard that afternoon, taking a devious route to avoid being sighted by Hooper's crowd. Their last stretch was up Squaw Creek, which formed the boundary between Bertram's T Bar T and Rancho Robles on the east. A windswept campfire was their guiding beacon as they came onto the ceinega flat that was Box L Springs, just at dark.

Judge Bertram met them there, weary and raw-tempered.

"Blowiest fall I remember," he grumbled. "Makes the herd restless. Stampede weather."

"And a little shooting'll start 'em. If they're not tight-bunched and close-circled," said Steele grimly.

"What in thunderation you hintin' at?" boomed Bertram.

"Raiders are headed up from Los Pasos."

Bertram stared incredulously.

"What you handin' me—facts or guesswork?"

"An even mix of each," chirped Shorty as he peeled out of saddle and made for the chuckwagon.

Bertram locked his hands behind him, back to the warming fire.

"Look here, Sheriff," he said bluntly. "Mebbe cattle spook easy. But I don't. In the old days I fought for what I got and fought some more to keep it. But those times are over. Sure, I expect to lose a few measly head now and then to range crooks. But a raid on five hundred head, that's too wild even for Los Pasos to tackle. Besides which, I'm short-handed, you know that. The boys would balk at double time, just on anybody's guesswork."

"Hooper is headed this way with a big crowd. No guesswork about that. We saw him leave Los Pasos about noon."

Bertram's square jowls were stubborn.

"You're jumpy, Sheriff. Over the duncing you took in town. Sure, we heard about it. Magpie."

BERTRAM ended in awkward silence, as though he wished he hadn't spoken. For there was an implied call down in his words. When an ordinary citizen backed down before a quicker gun, it was prudence. But for a sheriff, it smacked of cowardice.

"I'll take ordinary precautions, Sheriff. I'll keep the old sawed-off loaded and ready. But

[*Turn page*]

I can't tight-bunch these beefs. They need grass. This is the last good grazing between—"

"—Atween this lush spot and Cottonwood," came a harsh twangy voice from a tarp-covered hump in a blanket near the fire. It was McCall, Box L owner, a hard-headed Scotchman. "And I, for one, canna afford gaunt-weighted cattle at the shipping pens. Nay, Steele my lad, the cattle must spread and feed this night. Ye are o'erwraught wi' idle alarm. Let be now, leave a mon to his rest."

This was the price, Steele reflected ironically, that Hooper's draw had cost him. Already his authority had weakened. Among his own friends. Force was law on the Border. Men understood nothing less.

Even Shorty had come to doubt him.

Later, Shorty was at the tailgate of the chuckwagon, a thick steak sandwich in one hand and a tin cup of coffee in the other when Steele decided to leave the camp.

"Vayamos, segundo," he said. "Let's ride."

"Migosh, Sheriff, can't a feller take time to line his insides with a little chuck!" Shorty protested through a big bite.

"There'll be something harder than Sinker Sam's biscuits in your insides, segundo, if Hooper does the surprising instead of us."

"Hold on, now, what's the play?" Bertram demanded. He felt a little contrite over the way things had turned out.

Steele swept up the gelding's reins and mounted.

"Hope our guns won't disturb your rest, Judge," he flung back.

"Good Godfrey, don't go get your hackle up, just because of what I said."

His words were wasted on the wind. The gelding loped off in the dark. Shorty, with half a sandwich in his teeth, boarded the pinto and followed.

They circled the uneasy, bawling cattle and reached the Robles trail where it forked from the stage road, on the east rim of the spring flat. Scrubby desert growth lashed and took distorted shape in the vague starlight. The night was full of small alarms—grating of thorny branches on rugged ground, the organ note of wind in rocks. Beyond bulked the lava-capped Caliente Hills, where the trail climbed and dipped to Robles ground beyond.

"We'll look purty foolish, dragglin' back tuh camp at sunup if nuthin' happens," Shorty said doubtfully. "After all, Sheriff, that bunch we seen head out of Los Pasos might've been only some overnight drunks goin' back to the Robles spread."

Steele nudged him to silence as he heard hoofs click on the rocky trail. Some two miles away, the low-burning campfire on the spring flat was a glimmering pinpoint of light.

Shorty's .45 rasped out of holster.

He gripped Steele's arm for an instant and spoke once more in a choked undertone.

"I'm sorry."

A world of meaning was packed in those two simple words. They gave the sheriff solid reassurance that the little deputy was with him through thick and thin. They were a team again—the same indomitable pair that had brought law to the Borderland. Steele felt repaid for his long restraint.

He swerved sharply off the trail, making for a vantage point slightly above. But before he and Shorty could reach it, the Los Pasos raiders swarmed out of the night and were aware of them.

A voice stabbed out sharply, Hooper's voice.

"Smoke on through, boys! Let 'em have it!"

THE battle was joined with a storm of hoofs and a roar from Hooper's gun. Steele hit the ground. He was out of saddle so suddenly that Shorty was swept with the cold fear that the sheriff was hit. He slammed back at the spurting Hooper with his .45, three quick shots that had no visible effect, unless it was to speed the other riders past.

"Now, segundo!" crackled Steele, vaulting from a screen of cover to saddle again. In two bounds the gelding was down on the trail, the raiders bulked ahead. A Colt went to work at the massed target. Six shots, so fast that they made almost an unbroken lance of flame.

One Paseño screamed and fell with a terrific hammer blow of skull on rock. Another uttered a shuddering curse and reined downslope, hit and quitting.

Steele and Shorty were past him, hard on the trail of the confused group.

"Load up, segundo!"

Shorty was cramming loads already. And he understood Steele's tactics. It was to crowd the enemy hard and close, to give him no time to organize or to envelop the herd.

The Colt blasted another volley. Somewhere up ahead on the twisty trail a horse fell. Others, crowding close behind, piled onto it, stumbling and struggling.

Steele tight-reined the gelding to a rearing halt and was out of saddle again, on one knee. Out of the floundering tangle rose a hatless man. The Colt's last load put him down with a gurgling, wordless cry.

Shorty was crouched beside Steele as the hot Colt clattered out empties. Out of the mass, shouting defiance, a Paseño came straight at them, shooting. A slug ripped the the trail between Steele and Shorty. Another tugged at the flare of Shorty's bullhide chaps, just as he fired. His man loomed against the star-specked sky, a blur behind powder flame. Steele's other Colt joined Shorty's .45 and the shout turned to a hurt grunt. Ten yards ahead of them the rash Paseño dropped and rolled.

"I'm down but not out!" he challenged. "Come and get me, blast you!"

ON AHEAD raced his comrades, unpursued. Still enough of them to outnumber Bertram's trail herders.

But Bertram's riders were warned. The amount of shooting had given them some idea of the force of the attack.

Frantically and belatedly they would be circling and tightening the cattle, milling them to a center, thwarting the impending stampede by turning the cattle's fright into a maelstrom of horns and hoofs.

Then part of them could hold the herd, the rest face the raiders.

This ran through Steele's mind as he slid a load into the last empty Colt cylinder.

"Ten seconds to change your mind, loudmouth!" he called out. "Onto the trail with you, and keep 'em up!"

The answer was a taunting, uneven laugh.

"I'm a coiled rattler and set to strike!" it answered.

The outlaw blocked the trail and he knew it. Stalking him to smoke him out would cost precious time.

His snorting, terrified, riderless horse shielded him, evidently shutting him off from a telling aim.

"After all, it's Hooper we're after mainly, Sheriff!" blatted Shorty.

"Steele!" yelped the hidden man. "Dang it, no wonder we fumbled! Herb Hooper—blast him—said there wasn't a chance of a slip-up! Claimed he'd took care of Steele."

The rest of the lament was lost on the wind as the lawmen turned back. But they were hindered only briefly. Steele knew every dip and rise on this ground. The only trouble was to find a place to descend the steep, rubbly slope to the flat.

He led the way into a narrow, sandy-bottomed draw.

Near the bottom of the descent was a dry falls, a sheer break of some ten feet high. Reaching that, he swerved across the slope. The gelding picked its way over treacherous sliderock, the pinto tailing it. This last few yards was tantalizingly slow but once on smooth ground Steele sent his horse into a run that had Shorty's mount lagging.

AT HIS left was the herd. He was bound for the upper edge, where the stage road crossed the flat spring flat. Here the attack would come, he was convinced. Box L Springs was the source of Squaw Creek. The creek course made a natural chute which raiders would have chosen—hemmed in on the east by the Caliente Hills, on the west by brushy ridges.

He heard a shot ahead, flat and thin, and saw the gun streak. Hooper's crowd had clashed with a Bertram out-rider. He coaxed another notch of speed out of the gelding. Another shot flashed and with the drifted report came yells. The raiders were tilting in toward the herd.

He rode for a point between.

"Careful, now, segundo!" he flung back. "Time like this it's easy to gun your own people!"

He knew the little deputy's impulsiveness, knew that long frustration had quickened his trigger. That had been proved when Shorty had blatted that it was Hooper they were after.

Right now Hooper was less important than the Indian County herd. And Indian County lives.

Steele sensed presence ahead and pulled the gelding to a walk. He saw nobody, though his night vision was extraordinary, like a wild thing's. But his hearing was equally acute and he caught the drift of voices.

He moved toward the sound, presently in a lift of wind caught Hooper's up-raised voice.

"Now fan out and go to it! Tyler and Brown to the west side, the rest here on the east and Dolson with me on drag."

"And poke our heads into another trap?" argued another hotly.

"We're through that, you fools!"

"Besides, Dolson ain't here! We left him back in that pile-up."

Steele, at a touch, put the gelding in a lope, moving squarely toward the wavering, uncertain group.

"Here comes Dolson now!" Hooper said. "Hey, you, Dolson!"

He realized his mistake as a Colt thundered and a bullet smashed his left thigh. Hooper reeled and nearly fell as his horse whirled and bolted past his followers, leaving them to face the silent, unrecognized avenger.

CHAPTER V

Trap of Agony

WHITTLED down to nine, and one of them nursing a bullet-nicked shoulder, the Los Pasos raiders lost their nerve completely. They were leaderless. They knew not the strength of their deadly foe. Danger seemed to circle them. As Steele tore into them, twin Colts blazing, they scattered in panic.

They left one horse with empty stirrups. Its rider was a still heap in the trampled grass as Shorty charged in, just too late for the battle that had ended so suddenly. At Steele's call, he came, panting hopefully.

"That Hooper on the ground?" Shorty asked.

"Hooper cut loose on his lonesome," Steele said tersely, as he fingered loads out of his buscadero belt. "The rest, they've had enough."

"A dime a dozen, them rannigans. Dang that slippery Hooper!"

"We've got to nail him to put Joe Angiola in the coop," Steele said as he finished reloading.

Somewhere in the vast, dark void their quarry lurked. To hunt him seemed hopeless, just empty effort, a vainglorious gesture. But Steele had animal awareness and now the night wind fanned his fierce savage instincts into a sixth perceptive sense. He could see and hear where other men were blind and deaf. It was a difficult power to define. But Shorty knew that the sheriff had the powers of a panther on a dark hunt.

Why had Hooper, so bold in their earlier encounter with him, bolted from here without any show of resistance? There was only one answer to that, Steele decided. The man was hit, powerless to strike back.

What would Hooper do in his desperation? Not return to Los Pasos, certainly, to admit defeat and suffer Angiola's ire. He would do the same as any other maimed, hunted thing. He would proceed straight for the nearest, safest sanctuary.

Crooks before him had done the same. In a crisis they acted alike. Steele gambled everything in his next move.

He led the way to the pale streak of stage road and rode across the flat. Bertram's campfire was so near that they could see a moving figure against the flames.

"If that's the judge, we can crow our heads off," gloated Shorty.

"He ought to be told that the party's over," said Steele.

So they approached the fire, prudently proclaiming their presence with friendly hails. The man in camp proved not to be Bertram but the T Bar T cook, Sinker Sam, armed with shotgun, meat cleaver and an ax.

"Migosh, Sheriff!" gasped Shorty as the whiskery old ruffian lowered the shotgun from his shoulder. "We been nearer dead just now than ever before."

Sinker Sam was stone-deaf. He hadn't heard them.

"Gol-darn near made mince meat out of you fellers," he shouted in a high, flat voice. "Where yuh been? What's happened? What'd I better do now? How's the judge makin' out?"

They got out of there fast, to escape his flood of questions.

"Let the judge stew around till daylight," Shorty cackled. "He's got it coming. Where now, huh?"

"Home, segundo."

"Givin' up? Shucks!"

The little deputy grumbled as they climbed the west rim of the flat. The herd sounds were diminishing. Bertram's men had the cattle in control. The road wound across a rugged plateau, dropped down the rimrock grade into the desert basin that spanned the Caliente. Around midnight the jaded gelding and pinto jogged into Painted Post.

Shorty, still disgusted at this tame conclusion to their long day dropped the gate bars and unsaddled the horses. Steele ambled down into town.

Light showed from Thimble Jack's Saloon. A horse drooped at the hitch-rail. Avoiding the noisy, loose-planked sidewalk, Steele went to it. He ran a hand along the macarty rope, knotted to the hitch-rack, then across the saddle skirts. His hand came away wet. He stepped to a shaft of light shining past the batwing doors. His fingers were red-stained. But this time it was not paint.

HE FLUNG the saloon doors open with drawn Colt. Doc Crabtree whirled and blinked through his thick specs.

The Doc's sleeves were rolled up and he was at work on the bare, bullet-pierced leg of a man who sat on the bar, a bottle of whisky beside him, his six-gun leveled at the pale, busy doctor.

At Steele's abrupt entrance, the six-gun

whipped around fast. But not fast enough. The Colt fanged fire. Herb Hooper's weapon leaped out of his hand, the hand dropping across his bloody thigh.

Hooper's gun arm was smashed just above the elbow.

Doc Crabtree staggered back, rubbing his neck which smarted from the sting of powder particles, so close past him had the sheriff's shot come.

"Compared to that," he declared shakily, "I'd say lightning was slow!"

Hooper crumpled with a shuddering moan. But his good hand snaked for the whisky bottle. With a sudden treacherous burst of movement he flung it, dropping to the floor and scrambling for his fallen six-gun.

Steele ducked the bottle, which crashed against the saloon doors just as Shorty made breathless appearance, in time to be drenched with the contents. In time to see Steele kick Hooper's gun away from his clawing left-hand reach.

A noise on the stairs. Dictionary and Magpie peered at the scene. Reassured at what they saw, they emerged from the stairway.

A sheaf of Mexican currency spilled out of Hooper's jacket as he ripped at it, whimpering for Doc Crabtree to twist a tourniquet on his shattered arm.

"Mexico bound, like I figured," Steele remarked casually. "Well, patch him together, Doc, if you can, and we'll lock him up. Reckon that ends the performance.

"Except for one thing!" Dictionary spoke up shakily. "Has this lowdown miscreant still got my map?"

"You don't need it," Steele told him. "That Mesa Blanca it mentions is the chalky butte southeast of here, on the Border. What is meant by "where the sun sets twice" still has me guessing, though."

"And that 'at twenty-three and one half degrees' at the end of it," gabbled Magpie, proving that he had gotten a look at the cryptic treasure directions.

"Stars above, why didn't I savvy such a simple thing as that before!" Dictionary cried with sudden enlightenment.

"Simple?" said Steele.

"Downright elemental. What with this equinox weather we're havin'!"

"Equinox?" chattered Shorty. "What's that, a horned hoss?"

"That's a unicorn," Dictionary explained glibly, cradling his bandaged shoulder on the bar. "The equinox is when the sun is on the celestial equator."

"Astronomy seems to be one of your attainments," grunted Doc Crabtreet.

"I got a smattering," Dictionary said modestly. "The equinox comes in September, when the sun is twenty-three and one half degrees lower in the southern sky than on the longest day in June."

"I savvy now," Steele said. "The Devil's Doorknob throws two shadows as the setting sun passes behind it, then appears again. Same as some other prominent, isolated peaks."

"That's correct, Sheriff!" Dictionary said. "Now that we've got the Iron Door located, we'll be rich."

"Don't build up any hopes, old-timer," Steele told him. "Tell him, Hooper, about the Iron Door map."

"A fake!" groaned the man on the floor. "Aimed to get you away from the trail herd, Steele. Quit the confab, for heaven's sake. Help me, Doc."

"Migosh!" Shorty said in an awed voice, lifting his hat to run fingers through his stubborn red hair. And wincing as he touched his healing scalp wound. "That explains this whole danged mystery. All except one thing. Who walloped me on the head that night?"

THE hard gleam had gone from Steele's gray eyes. They crinkled amusedly as he looked at the little handyman.

"Dictionary can explain that, too, segundo," he said with quiet assurance.

Dictionary looked abashed.

"I been fixin' to confess and apologize, Deputy," he said.

"What?" yelped Shorty. "Yuh mean tuh say yuh're guilty?"

Dictionary flung an appealing glance at Steele and squirmed uncomfortably.

"Guilty of a act of carelessness produced by my excitement when I found that map. I—I left my hammer on the roof."

"And it slid off just as you went outside to take the map up to the jail, segundo," Steele finished for him. "I saw him pick up the hammer next morning, where you stood when you got that mysterious crack on the head. And shot at Magpie."

"This is a fitten time," Magpie began glibly, "to tell why I was in such a rush to git outside that night—"

"Help me!" whimpered Hooper.

Doc Crabtree remembered his oath of medicine, never to refuse aid, even to the undeserving.

"Hoist him back on the bar, boys," he said.

Next Issue: Sheriff Blue Steele in MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, By Tom Gunn

Todd went back and was saved from falling only by Meredith's horse

BADLAND BARRISTER

By CLIFF WALTERS

Cowtown lawyer Jeff Meredith sticks to his clients—even when they turn against him and put obstacles in his path!

JEFF MEREDITH, handsome, prematurely gray attorney for the accused, appeared to be the most tranquil person in the old stone courthouse at Prairie Center. A courthouse packed with spectators, sober-faced men of the range, who were listening to Austin Clark, county attorney, making his final plea to the jury.

A wiry, energetic man, Clark was thundering:

"Evidence presented at this trial proves conclusively that the defendant, David Sinclair, is guilty of the crime with which he is charged. And for which he must pay. It was Sinclair who freed his friend Bootjack Jones, a fiendish murderer still at large, from the Prairie Center jail. And why? Because Jones had once helped Dave Sinclair save a small bunch of the defendant's cattle that were snowbound in a canyon.

"Well, gentlemen of the jury, gratitude is a noble virtue. But when Sinclair's gratitude —if there wasn't also a little cash involved in the jail-break plot—freed a murderer who

committed still another murder after he broke jail—"

Austin Clark's eloquence went on and on. And not without its effect. The jury deliberated only a short time before they found Dave Sinclair, the cowman from Grass Creek, guilty of having assisted an outlaw to escape from the Prairie City jail. And the judge of the district court sentenced dark, bitter-eyed Dave Sinclair to ten years in the pen.

"Keep your chin up, Dave," said Jeff Meredith. Then, his voice suddenly husky, the attorney shook hands with the prisoner and walked from the courthouse.

But Meredith hadn't gone far when he was overtaken by Dave's only son, Keith Sinclair, who was a husky twenty-one. Dark eyes, smoldering, voice tinctured with contempt, Keith Sinclair faced Jeff.

"A fine lawyer—and pardner—you are!" he said. "Takin' everything cool and easy while that loud-mouthed lizard, Austin Clark, railroads Dad to the pen for something that I—and you—know confounded well Dad didn't do!"

"Easy, Keith," said Meredith. "I did my best but the evidence was too strong."

"If that's yore best, yuh shyster tenderfoot," flamed Keith, "it's too bad they ever gave yuh a license to practise law in Wyoming! But it wasn't yore best. It's just like Tepee Todd said, yuh probably wanted Dad locked up! Where Dad made his mistake was in befriendin' a down-and-out young shyster that came West for his health. But he took yuh out to the ranch because he felt sorry for yuh. He nursed yuh back to health. And then made the error of lettin' yuh work into a pardnership with him on the land and cattle! Now yuh think yuh can grab the whole outfit!"

"Calm down, Keith," said Meredith quietly. "If we're going to get along together out there at the ranch—"

"Together!" the young man growled. "We're goin' to divide that little outfit. I'm goin' to take my half before you worm around and skin me out of that, too!"

"You don't really mean what you're saying, Keith," Jeff Meredith replied, calm blue eyes meeting the younger man's wrathful gaze. "Your father and you and I have been friends, fellow."

"Yeah, and now yuh've double-crossed Dad and me because we made the sad mistake of lettin' you pretend to protect Dad at that trial! Tep—somebody dropped the remark that mebbe you broke Bootjack Jones out of jail. How about it, Mr. Meredith?"

Keith Sinclair's hands were clenched, his temper straining at the leash.

"I know you've had a hard jolt, and that you have reason to be upset," was Jeff Meredith's answer. "I'd hoped, however, that you were rational enough not to believe the lies of the somebody you started to mention by name—Tepee Todd, a tricky, fast-thinking livestock dealer that your dad, as well as I, has little use for. Just because Todd lends you a few dollars to gamble with now and then doesn't mean that he's your friend."

"A double-crossing thief like you are—preachin' about the evils of gamblin'!" growled Keith Sinclair, and suddenly threw a right fist that peeled hide from Jeff Meredith's left cheek, and sent him rocking off the sidewalk.

MEREDITH'S own hands clenched then. He took a step toward the young man who had struck him, then stopped.

"Come on, yuh yellow cur!" Keith taunted, while spectators came running to witness the excitement. "Yuh're well and strong again, thanks to Dad!"

But Meredith chose not to tangle with Keith Sinclair. The lawyer-rancher who had appeared in a Wyoming court only once, and then to loose his case, pressed a blue bandanna to his bleeding face and walked on down the street.

"What's the matter, Shyster?" "Tepee" Todd, a brawny man who dealt in livestock, hooted. "Are yuh afraid you might get hurt—instead of the client that was fool enough to trust yuh?"

Meredith made no reply. Clumping on down the street in his old boots, and looking unlike a lawyer in the range garb that he had adopted years ago, he entered the livery stable where he quickly saddled his roan horse. Then, just as quickly, he left town.

Smarting inside, wishing he had never attempted to defend his partner, he rode a prairie trail that would take him to an old log house on the bank of Grass Creek. A house that would be lonely without Dave Sinclair. . . .

Jeff Meredith cooked supper for two, and kept watching the trail for sight of Keith Sinclair. But the young man didn't appear that evening, as Meredith had hoped he might.

The loneliness of the ranch was depressing. Meredith went to bed, but he couldn't sleep. Keith Sinclair's accusations kept hammering against his ear-drums. And when he looked out the window he didn't see beauty in the stars that hung like twinkling candles in

the green plumes of the tallest cottonwoods. He saw only Dave Sinclair's range-weathered face pressed against jail bars.

It was the next day before Keith appeared, riding in a buckboard with Attorney George McVerish, a thirsty, incompetent old resident of Prairie Center. Keith got out of the rig, scowled at Meredith who had come to the door.

"Mac's drawed up some papers for yuh to sign, Meredith," Keith said. "As I told yuh yesterday, when yuh was too yellow to fight back after I'd busted yuh one, we're splittin' this outfit up. I think it's best. So does Dad, after the way things have turned out."

"I was hoping you'd cool off and change your mind about that splitting up business," Meredith answered. "But I can see that you've only been nursing your fancied grudge. If those papers are in order, I'll sign them so you can start immediately to squander what your father worked so hard to accumulate."

"Don't fret about these papers not being in order," said McVerish dourly. He had wanted to represent Dave Sinclair at the trial and, Jeff Meredith knew, was secretly pleased that the defense had lost the case.

Meredith read those papers, pointed out two mistakes in McVerish's legal composition. When they were corrected, he affixed his signature to the document.

"I think your method of dividing the land and livestock is fair to both of us," he said to Keith. "Thanks for being willing to do it that way."

"I didn't want to cheat yuh none," said the younger man testily. "But I won't live in this house with yuh."

"You won't have to," Meredith replied. "I'll move over to my homestead cabin—on the hundred and sixty acres that I contributed to the partnership, a little contribution you seem to forget in your high-handed hysteria of self-pity."

Wrath leaped to Keith's dark eyes. "Yuh wouldn't want to steal all of what yuh're gettin', would yuh?"

Jeff Meredith didn't reply to that thrust. He walked down to the barn, harnessed one of the two teams and hauled his personal belongings to an old cabin a mile away. A lonely dwelling on Meadow Creek, a small tributary stream which joined with Grass Creek.

Two months later Meredith sold his half of the cattle—seventy head. Keith Sinclair kept what cattle he had left—fifty head. He had gambled twenty head away, along with two big stacks of hay he lost over the poker table to the owner of the livery barn in Prairie Center.

Meredith was angry when he heard about Keith's losing that hay. But he didn't attempt to lecture a lonely, wayward young man whose recklessness had made him the target of Prairie Center gossip.

Meredith and Keith hadn't spoken to each other since the day they had divided a herd of a hundred and forty cattle. The lawyer had tried to speak, but had been stopped cold by the stony, hostile glare of the young man who was now his enemy.

When it was time to cut and stack the wild hay that grew along Meadow Creek, Meredith hired a grizzled old range tramp to help with the work. Old Pete Parnell was none too clean or none too industrious. Yet he was company for a man on whom solitude had begun to pall. Pete was a shabbily garbed travelogue. He and a brother, now dead, had helped drill the first oil wells in the West. They had prospected in Alaska; had run wild horses in Arizona; and had bootlegged liquor to Indians on a reservation in Montana.

PETE stayed with Meredith a month. Then his thirst and nomadic inclinations got the better of him. He went to Prairie Center, went on a gigantic spree. One day a passing cowpuncher told Meredith that Pete Parnell was in jail, charged with raising a ten-dollar check he had won in a poker game to a hundred and ten dollars. Pete wanted to see Jeff Meredith. The fall term of court would soon be in session.

As much as Meredith dreaded the thought of appearing in the Prairie Center courthouse again, he did it because he pitied an old vagabond who, without friends or funds, faced a long jail sentence.

This time Jeff Meredith won his case. He proved that the bartender at the Campfire Saloon—burly Ancil Todd who was a brother of Teepee Todd, the livestock dealer—had raised the ten-dollar check he had cashed for Pete Parnell, that he had pocketed the hundred dollars and was trying to make Pete the goat.

When Meredith walked out of the courthouse, with a grateful Pete Parnell at his side, Keith Sinclair, who was spending most of his time in town lately, was outside.

"The shyster can do pretty good, when he wants to!" Keith said loudly to his companion, Tepee Todd.

"Shyster!" growled Pete Parnell, clenching unclean fists. "Listen at that tooted-up toad! I've been around here long enough to

know that Jeff Meredith's worth a dozen spite-spittin' sports like yuh and that peak-pointed hat with yuh, Sinclair. Yuh've got so much saloon smoke in yore bloodshot eyes yuh can't tell tin whistles from turnips. It's too bad Jeff didn't get all the outfit out there on Grass Crick. Yore part of it's dribblin' through yore work-shunnin' fingers like buckshot out of a chipmunk-chawed gunny-sack."

"If yuh wasn't so old I'd knock them four last teeth out of yore mouth!" Keith Sinclair retorted.

"Come on, Pete," said Meredith, taking his companion's tense arm.

"Mebbe I'd better," Pete answered. "The way young Sinclair and his peak-hatted pard are glarin' at me. How am I goin' to pay yuh for what yuh've done for me, Jeff? . . . Say, I just happened to think!"

"Come on," Meredith urged. "I see the old freighter, Ed Donahue, hooking up his teams down there by the livery barn. I think you'd better catch a ride with him and get away from the Todd brothers. . . ."

Winter struck early. And hard. One snowstorm followed another until the grass, plentiful as it was, became buried under a crusted blanket. Meredith saw Keith Sinclair riding the hills, rounding up his cattle and taking them into the field on Grass Creek.

Meredith, who had only a few horses to feed, stayed in his cabin most of the time and read law books. He thought that when spring came he would sell his land, which wasn't too good, and move over to Bentcliff, a pretty and prosperous town located at the foot of the Craghorn Mountains. This prairie country was too exposed, too cold and windswept in the winter.

Perhaps there would be an opening for a lawyer in Bentcliff, a town where people wouldn't point tormenting fingers and say to one another, "There goes the shyster that let his pard go to the pen."

Or maybe he wouldn't set up a law practise in Bentcliff. If there was some good land around there, a small place that could be bought reasonably, he might buy it. Jeff Meredith had grown to love the outdoors, the sunshine, the sage-scented earth that had restored his health.

He couldn't quite reconcile himself to the thought of being cooped up in an office again. Nor would he ever have considered it if his partner, honest, hard-working Dave Sinclair, hadn't been deprived of the thing most precious to man—freedom.

It was a cold, raw day of early March when Keith Sinclair shoved open the door of Jeff Meredith's wind-assaulted cabin and stepped inside.

"I'm not here from choice," the grim-eyed visitor said to the lawyer who had been reading. "The bank wouldn't loan me any more money for cow feed, even if there was any place I could buy it. You've got the only hay around. How much is it worth a ton—if yuh'd sell it to me?"

"Twenty dollars," said Jeff flatly.

"Twenty dollars!" the visitor echoed, bristling. "Yuh're the coldest-blooded coyote I ever met. I wish Dad was here now. I'd like to tell him how yuh bought my note from the bank. Yuh gambled on a hard winter, didn't yuh? Thought I'd have to come crawlin' on my hands and knees up here to beg hay from yuh!"

"Why did you gamble your own feed away, or part of it?"

"That's my business!"

"Yes, I know. Gambling. Well, are you going to let those dumb cattle die of starvation, or are you going to buy my hay?"

"I can't pay for it. Yuh've already got a mortgage on 'em. Well, take 'em. And take the land that's in that mortgage, too! Yuh've got what yuh wanted. Yuh've grabbed the whole outfit!" Keith Sinclair's tone was as bitter as the chill March wind.

"Sign this paper," said Jeff Meredith bluntly.

Keith signed the paper, staggered Meredith with a blow to the face, and left. He headed across the white hills toward town while Meredith, saddling his roan horse, rode down to Grass Creek, rounded up a bunch of hungry, bawling, back-humped cattle and drove them toward the haystacks on Meadow Creek.

IT WAS a week before Meredith went to town for his mail. There he learned that Keith Sinclair had pulled out, had gone over to the Bentcliff country where, several weeks ago, Tepee Todd had gone. And after having pulled a shady deal on a livestock transaction in Prairie Center. A peculiar smile came to Jeff Meredith's face when he heard that. . . .

It was a bright, golden afternoon in early May when Jeff Meredith, a "bad badland lawyer," as the hostile citizens of Prairie Center had dubbed him, drove into the prosperous foot-hills town of Bentcliff. Pretty country, this, with the canyon-etched slope of the Craghorn Mountains rising gently from the red hills below.

His gaze rested on a crescent-shaped mesa looming colorfully to the west of town, a

level-topped benchland, not too high, which shelved off the lower slope of the mountains. That would be what they called Crescent Mesa.

Before the sun set that evening Meredith had rented a long, narrow, false-fronted log building at the end of Bentcliff's main street. Two rooms constituted living quarters. The front room, the largest, could be made into an office.

"This town needs a lawyer," "Scotty" McNair, owner of the property, said to Meredith. "There's just Cartwright, the county attorney, and Sam Grennault. But Sam's old and rich and cranky and wants to retire. He ain't interested in any case that don't mean a lot of money to him."

"I'll look the proposition over," Meredith said. "I may open a law office and I may not. I like to be outdoors."

"Better reap while the harvest's good," said Scotty shrewdly. "The spring term of court'll be along soon. Mebbe yuh can drum up some business."

Jeff Meredith didn't do any drumming. He fixed up his living quarters and let the office go. He was carrying two joints of stovepipe home from the store one evening, was passing the Red Front Saloon when he heard a shot, and then the swift clumping of boots.

A hard-pushed swinging door opened. And Keith Sinclair, bareheaded and carrying a six-shooter, ran out into the street. But he didn't get to mount the buckskin horse tied to the saloon hitching rack, a buckskin horse that Meredith had recognized while enroute to the store.

Three men, hard on Keith's heels, grabbed the young man, wrested his gun away from him and started to drag him back into the saloon. They didn't reach their destination. Sheriff Al LeFarge, a stocky, iron-gray man, came running out of his office across the street and took charge of things.

"What happened here?" the officer barked.

"This hard-losin', would-be poker player shot Tray Moberly!" shouted the lanky barkeep who had first grabbed Keith.

"I called him for pullin' a second card out of the deck when he was dealin'!" Keith angrily replied. "He reached for his gun, but I stopped him with a bullet through his shoulder. He'd have killed me for callin' him by his right names if I hadn't!"

"Tray wasn't cheatin'!" yelled the bartender. "Yuh just got sore 'cause he took yore few dollars away from yuh!"

Argument waxed warmly while Meredith, unnoticed by Keith, entered the saloon and did some investigating.

Later that evening—it was dusk—Jeff walked over to the little jail and spoke to the young man whose grim face was pressed against the bars of a glassless window.

"What's the matter, Mr. Sinclair?" he asked. "Were you afraid your father was getting lonesome down at the state penitentiary?"

"Who sent for you, yuh gloatin' shyster?" Keith snapped, wrath blazing to his dark eyes. "Yuh're a lower-crawlin' snake than that tricky card shark I put lead into!"

"Nobody sent for me," Jeff Meredith answered. "If they send you down to see your father, you might tell him I've sold the Grass Creek place and have moved to Bentcliff. He never answers my letters, because you and some of your Prairie Center cronies poisoned his mind against me."

"Dad ain't in for life," was the prisoner's reply. "He'll live to square things with yuh."

"I hope so," Meredith said dryly. "I'm getting tired of playing guardian angel to—" He didn't finish. He turned and walked away.

Grumpy, money-loving old Sam Grennault, attorney, refused to defend Keith Sinclair.

"I'm all through messing around with saloon brawl clients—tinhorn gamblers, drunkards, paupers," Grennault said.

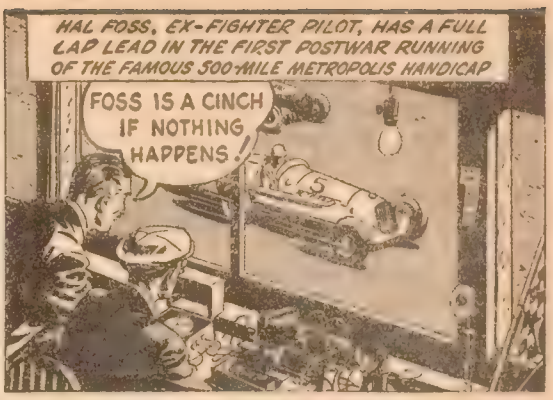
Meredith got in touch with the judge of the district court and managed to have himself appointed legal counsel for Keith Sinclair. When Tepee Todd, who was now dealing in livestock around Bentcliff, heard that, he immediately relayed the news to the prisoner who flew into a rage and swore that Meredith would not defend him. And get revenge for the times Keith had punched him in the face.

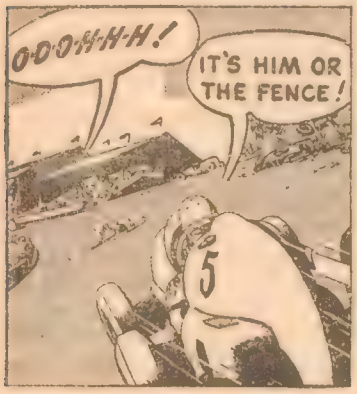
BUT the court had something to say about that. When the prisoner was led into the courtroom, angry enough to commit murder, it was Jeff Meredith who acted as attorney for the defendant. It was Meredith who cross-examined the bartender crony of a wounded card shark named "Tray" Moberly, and who tore the bartender's testimony to sheds, and the testimony of two other glib-tongued witnesses. It was Meredith who produced two disinterested spectators to the shooting fray, witnesses who declared, and with unshakable straightforwardness, that Keith Sinclair had shot only in self-defense. Yet when the defendant was acquitted, Jeff Meredith learned that hate was stronger than gratitude.

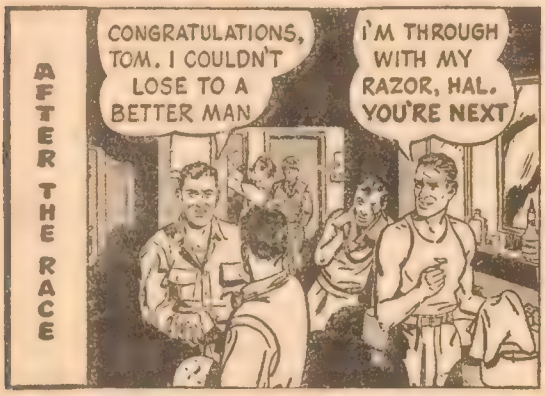
"Testimony of honest witnesses would've freed me, anyhow," Keith said sullenly. "Yuh

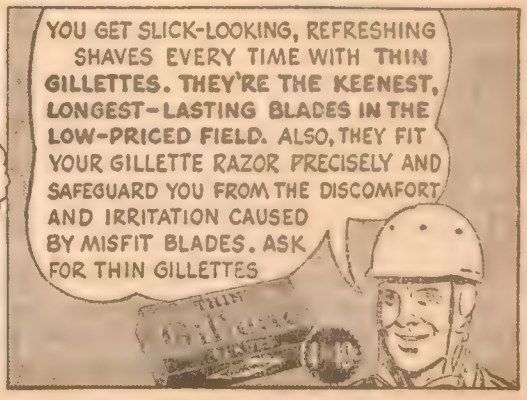
[*Turn to page 30*]

Hal Sacrificed His Chance To Win, But Then...


HAL FOSS, EX-FIGHTER PILOT, HAS A FULL LAP LEAD IN THE FIRST POSTWAR RUNNING OF THE FAMOUS 500-MILE METROPOLIS HANDICAP
FOSS IS A CINCH IF NOTHING HAPPENS!






YOU GET SLICK-LOOKING, REFRESHING SHAVES EVERY TIME WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICED FIELD. ALSO, THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY AND SAFEGUARD YOU FROM THE DISCOMFORT AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN

just tried to make a big play to drum up a little law business, Mr. Meredith, And collect a little money from the county."

"Thanks for being so unbiased and gracious," Meredith told him. "Now you can get back to the saloon and make up for the time you've lost. I won't be practising law here, trying to save the necks of saloon bums who aren't worth saving. I'll buy myself a little ranch."

"With money yuh stole from Dad and me!" said Keith, and walked away.

But two days later Keith called at Jeff Meredith's place. The young man's attitude had undergone an apparent change. He was no longer belligerent. Now he seemed contrite.

"I guess mebbe I would've been sent up if yuh hadn't dug up them witnesses and handled things for me like yuh did, Jeff," he said. "I've been a awful fool. I can see that now. If there's anything I can do to help yuh out . . . Yuh talked the other day about wantin' a ranch. I think mebbe I know where yuh can buy one."

"Where?" Jeff said.

"Crescent Mesa. There's a lot of fine land up there. Not rough and rocky like the old Grass Creek place."

"How about water for irrigation?"

"Yuh don't need it up there. Bein' located where it is, and catchin' every rain that comes along the mountain, Crescent Mesa's always green. I'll take yuh up there. Show yuh grass over a foot high."

"Thanks, Keith. I'll go up there some day soon and look it over."

Keith seemed more and more friendly as he extolled the virtues of Crescent Mesa. He knew the man who owned the best land up there now, an old-timer who owned the spring at Monument Mound where there was a cabin, barn and corrals.

"How much does he ask for the property?" Jeff inquired.

"He's askin' too little. Three thousand dollars."

"Tell him to make it fifteen hundred—cash—and I'll buy it right now. If it's as good as you say it is."

Keith's eyes hardened as he said, "Do yuh want to steal . . . Well, I'm shore he won't take fifteen hundred. But if yuh've got the cash, I'll tell him.

"You know I've got it," Jeff said.

Jeff Meredith bought the place that day, and without even seeing it. Buildings and a lot of land, for fifteen hundred dollars. But he hadn't owned his unseen place for more than two hours when Scotty McNair, his landlord, came around.

"Yuh're a fine one, Meredith!" Scotty said excitedly. "Lettin' young Sinclair and that overgrowed ape, Tepee Todd, pan Crescent Mesa off onto yuh! Why, that spring up there goes dry about mid-summer. You'll even have to haul drinkin' water."

"So Tepee Todd owned the place, did he?"

"Yeah. He bit on it when he first landed here. Paid two thousand dollars for it. And it ain't worth two hundred. A dozen suckers have bit on that Crescent Mesa bait. Which ain't, and never will be, nothin' more than grazin' land! Golly, man! If you'd only asked me about it!"

"I imagine you get a wonderful view from up there, though."

"Wonderful view!" McNair snorted disgustedly. "Everybody's laughin' at yuh. And laughin' the most is young Sinclair and Todd. Oh, why didn't yuh let 'em send that sinnin' Sinclair to jail?"

The next morning, early, Meredith rode his roan horse out to Crescent Mesa. Following a dim, steep road to the top of that tableland, he headed toward a monument, built of red stone, which stood on the highest point of the mesa. On the largest stone of that large, sturdy monument were inscribed the words:

HERE LIES REX BROWN WHO DIED AUGUST THE ——

There was no date.

Meredith looked at the nearby buildings which could be repaired. He looked at the sweep of the nearby mountains and down across the lower country where far-distant creeks winked brightly among willows and cottonwoods that lined their winding courses. This was beauty, he thought.

He didn't want to go back to town. But there was much to be done. He would have to buy supplies, and attend to many chores. . . .

AT NOON Jeff Meredith rode into Bentcliff. Keith Sinclair, who was lounging over a saloon hitching rack beside Tepee Todd, called tauntingly:

"How do yuh like your new ranch, Mr. Meredith?"

"It's better than I thought," Jeff replied. "If I'd seen it before buying, I'd never have had the nerve to bargain you down to fifteen hundred on it. Have you gambled away the commission that Todd paid you yet?"

"I'll tend to my gamblin'—you tend to yore new ranch!" Keith replied. "What I helped get out of yuh ain't near as much as yuh got

out of Dad. I'd like to have broke yuh flat!"

"You might trade an old grudge for a few brains and keep trying," Meredith said. "But you'll need a better adviser than that vulture-beaked boar ape beside you there. A boar ape that thinks he's a fox. And is just foxy enough to wind up behind bars one of these days."

"Foxy enough that I just trimmed you, the brilliant lawyer, out of fifteen hundred dollars!" jeered Tepee Todd. "That's why yuh're squirmin'. Yuh'd squirm more if yuh wasn't on that hoss. I'd twist the ears off yore head if yuh wasn't so yeller yuh'd let a man like Keith here—no bigger than you are—punch yuh twice without darin' to fight back."

Jeff Meredith did what looked to be a reckless thing then. He got off his horse. Todd stared for a moment, as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"I've come to hate that word yellow," Meredith said. "Perhaps it was thrown in my face too often over at Prairie Center. I wouldn't want to get the people of Bentcliff started on it. So, rather than that—"

"Yuh'll take a beatin', eh?" growled Todd, moving heavily, formidably around the end of the hitching rack. "All right. I'll give yuh one yuh won't forget. And wish that old Dave Sinclair was here to see it!"

A huge, bone-cracking fist lashed out at Meredith's face. But that tanned, grim-lipped face was not there. Meredith's left hand shot out, jabbed Todd in the mouth. Todd swore. Two more lightninglike jabs caught him on the mouth and kept him off balance. Then he swung his right again, and again Jeff Meredith, using his feet as cleverly as he used his hands, was just out of Todd's reach—and crossing with a solid right that smashed to Todd's sizable nose. Todd went back and was saved from falling only by Jeff's horse.

"Wade into him, Todd!" yelled Keith Sinclair, while men came running out of doorways.

Todd tried wading, but he never could get quite set for the blow he craved to land, a stunning smash to Jeff Meredith's jaw. Two or three times he landed glancing blows, but he was taking too many punches which, quick and confusing at first, were now gathering steam.

"I used to box quite a little at school, Mr. Todd!" said Meredith and, raining a tattoo of jabs to Todd's bleeding mouth, brought up a right that crashed to the bigger man's nose and staggered him.

Todd, managing to keep his feet, went crazy mad. Spectators were jeering at him. Jeff Meredith was smiling at him. Todd, half-blinded with blood and sweat, tried to grapple with Meredith, but he didn't make it. Jeff was too elusive a target. His left jab kept popping in there.

A blow to the midriff took Todd's breath. A smash to the left ear caused him to rock sideward. He roared like an infuriated grizzly and rushed again. This time he landed a lucky punch that might have felled Meredith, if Jeff hadn't been rolling with that punch.

Encouraged, Todd tried another one—missed, and took a right and a left and another hard right to the face. He was reeling now. He kept on reeling as Jeff, so fast and skilled that spectators gaped at a brand of fighting they had never before witnessed, beat his bigger opponent back, step by step. But it wasn't till Todd was strictly on the defense that Meredith opened up with long, powerfully smooth blows that cut the bigger man down, sent him crashing into the dust of Main Street.

"I should have stopped it, Meredith," said Sheriff Al LeFarge. "But after Todd sellin' yuh that worthless mesa, I didn't blame yuh for givin' him the beatin' of his life! Not that I'd bet a dime to a dollar that yuh could. Good gosh, he outweighs yuh forty pounds!"

"I don't begrudge the money he got from me," Meredith answered. "But he needed a good beating more than I wanted to have people calling me yellow. What are you gaping at, Mr. Sinclair?"

"I'm wonderin'," said Keith, "why yuh didn't have nerve enough to tangle with me when I landed on yuh."

"I don't hit little half-wits," Meredith said coldly.

He turned and led his horse toward the livery stable while the crowd—and Keith Sinclair—stared after him. . . .

WITHIN a week Jeff Meredith was ready to move out to the mesa where he had been doing some work. He was packing up some law books the night that Keith Sinclair came to the door. Keith's face was battered. His lip was cut; his nose swollen; his right eye black.

"Did you catch another gambler cheating?" Jeff asked mildly.

"I haven't been gamblin'," was the younger man's reply. "Tepee Todd beat me up for laughin' about his battle with you. Not that I'm complainin'. Mebbe I had a beatin' comin' to me, after the way I treated you. Here's forty of that fifty-dollar commission Todd paid me on the mesa deal."

He tossed two twenty-dollar bills on a table.

"What's the idea? How's the deck stacked this time?"

"It ain't stacked," Keith answered flatly. "Mebbe Todd knocked some sense into me. I've been seein' things clearer through a black eye. I guess mebbe I'd never got off for shootin' that tricky gambler, Moberly, if you hadn't come to my rescue. And, lookin' back at Dad's trial—without Todd whisperin' over my shoulder—I realize yuh did all yuh could to save him. That's somethin' I wouldn't have admitted six months ago if yuh'd twisted a knife in me. I wrote Dad a letter today and told him. I'm glad now yuh got the Grass Crick place. I'd only have throwed it away. But I'm sorry I helped Todd sting yuh on that mesa deal."

"This doesn't sound like the Keith Sinclair I've known during the past year," Jeff Meredith said, sizing up his visitor slowly, carefully.

"I've got a job at the livery barn," Keith went on. "Out of my wages the boss is payin' you twenty dollars a month—till yuh've got a hundred. I figger yuh're entitled to that much more than the county paid yuh for gettin' me out of that gamblin' scrape. The last gamblin' scrape I'll ever be in."

Keith's voice was unsteady. Tears came to his eyes. He turned abruptly and walked away into the night. Meredith gazed at two bills lying on the table, and suddenly there was moisture in his own eyes.

Up at daylight the next morning, Meredith was starting a breakfast fire when he suddenly froze in his tracks. He had seen two riders coming down the slope above Bentcliff. A tall rider mounted on a flaxen-maned sorrel horse; a rider who led the black horse ridden by a still taller man.

Meredith forgot about building a fire. He went outdoors, walked out into the deserted street and waited there. The riders came nearer. And suddenly the man on the sorrel horse called:

"Well, here we are, Jeff!"

"Good for you, Tom!" Meredith's voice had a ring in it.

But he didn't look at Tom Hargrove, a lean, hard-bitten man with a gun on his hip and another one in his saddle scabbard. Meredith's grim, accusing gaze was focused on the rider of the black horse, a gangling, slit-eyed man with oily strings of long black hair dangling over the collar of his dirty flannel shirt; a man whose long chin, once nicked with a bullet, had a V-shaped scar where lead had chipped away the bone—a scar that was a small replica of a V in a bootjack.

"It's been a long trail for me and a costly one for you, Jeff," said Tom Hargrove. "You sendin' me my sixty-dollar check every month, to different post-offices all over the southern part of the state."

"You got the snake you were trailing," said Jeff, never taking his eyes off "Bootjack" Jones. "And you're going to get an extra bonus, Tom. Paid by the partnership of Sinclair and Meredith."

Fifteen minutes later Jeff Meredith, followed by two riders, went down the deserted main street of Bentcliff. The rancher-lawyer entered the livery barn where Keith Sinclair, who was now getting up, rather than staying up until daylight, had started his morning chores.

Hands trembling a little, Keith rushed out of the barn to face a prisoner who had once been freed from the Prairie Center jail.

"Yuh say, Jones," cried young Keith Sinclair, and he was hardly able to talk, "that Dad didn't bust yuh out of jail?"

"It was a gent that wanted an old rancher killed, a gent that bought ten head of steers from the old rancher, and then got away with seventeen head of 'em," growled Bootjack Jones. "But the old rancher got suspicious."

"Yuh mean, it was Tepee Todd that turned yuh loose?" Keith choked out.

"Yore old saloon pal, yep," sneered Bootjack Jones.

"Take it easy, Keith," Meredith advised.

"Take it easy!" Keith rumbled.

The young man whirled and ran across the street, crossed a vacant, weed-grown lot and burst into an old cabin. The cabin where Tepee Todd lived.

"I'd better get over there, Tom," said Meredith. "Perhaps Keith won't need me, though. I hope not!"

A yell emanated from that old cabin. Then Keith Sinclair, who had risen to a height of fury that he had never before attained, and probably never would again, came dragging Tepee Todd, clad only in his shirt and underwear, from that cabin.

TODD was allowed to get to his feet, but he didn't stay in that position long. A hate-powered blow to his face caused him to rock backward. But he recovered and tore into the young man he had whipped yesterday. And there was a moment when Jeff Meredith, praying that he wouldn't have to, thought he had better take over young

Keith's dangerous responsibilities.

Yet if Keith took terrific punishment for a moment, he refused to go down under Todd's brutal onslaught. He fought back with maniacal savagery. Fought for a man who, this morning, would wake up behind a barrier of steel bars and stone walls.

Neighbors roused by the commotion came running, half-clad, from their houses. They saw Keith Sinclair absorbing punishment and meting it out with a vengeance. They saw the tide of battle flow in Tepee Todd's favor for a little while. They saw Keith stem that tide with jolting fists strengthened by righteous wrath. They saw the tide of battle shift slowly but surely to the younger, smaller contestant's advantage. They saw Todd, battered and reeling and gasping for breath, crumple beneath hammering fists.

Keith flung himself upon the loser, jerked him up to a limp sitting position. And let him see, through dazed eyes, a prisoner whom Tom Hargrove, once a deputy sheriff over at Prairie Center, was guarding.

Todd's gaze riveted to the sneering face of Bootjack Jones and held there.

"Juh—Jones!" Todd mumbled. "Yuh had —to go and spill—"

"There wasn't much else he could do," said Jeff Meredith. "He's in rope up to his neck, and knows it. And you'll soon be with him. . . ."

A week later Meredith and Keith and Dave Sinclair rode in a wagon toward a torn-down rock monument that had long been a landmark on the grassy sweep of a mesa. And then, when they arrived at that pile of red stones, Keith could see why Meredith had not complained after having paid fifteen hundred for this property.

Clear, cold water was flowing over the top of the thick casing, twelve inches in diameter, that had long been capped and hidden beneath a rock monument.

"This is the pay I got for defending an old vagabond named Pete Parnell," said Jeff. "You remember him, Keith. He helped me put up hay last summer. And then got in trouble when a bartender, Tepee Todd's coyote brother, raised a check that old Parnell had got him to cash."

"I remember," Keith said, and his voice shook a little. "Still, yuh put a lot of trust in what that old drifter told yuh."

"I know when a man's telling the truth," Meredith said. "And when a man's worth saving. When old Pete told me he'd helped drill an oil well up on this mesa years ago, and that they'd struck a fine flow of water but no oil, I believed him. And I'd have paid —with our money—three times what Todd asked me for this place."

"But that name on the monument," Keith answered. "I thought it was somebody's grave. It said, 'Here Lies Rex Brown Who—'"

"Rex was a dog," said Meredith, smiling. "A dog owned by Brown, the man who had the contract on the well. Brown didn't want his dog's monument disturbed, or his artesian well discovered. He figured he'd come back here some day and build himself a ranch on top of this mesa. But he died years ago. And now you and your father and I are going to build that ranch. A good one! Better, by far, than the outfit on Grass Creek."

"It's mighty pretty up here, pard," said Dave Sinclair. "Mighty pretty to a man like me that's been—" His gaze traveled slowly, thankfully around the open country of freedom. "I'm shore glad yuh had so much patience with Keith—and me."

"Especially me," Keith said huskily.

"Shucks," said Jeff Meredith, grinning broadly. "Didn't I just get through telling you I know when a man's worth saving?"

Laying an affectionate left hand on Dave Sinclair's shoulder, Meredith extended his right hand to Keith. The younger man gripped that hand with an eloquence far more expressive than the words he could not say right then.

Three men stood there in silence. Men who could see, even with eyes that blurred a little, their own cattle grazing on this mesa, and a new home where the hard-tested lamp of loyalty would burn steadily through the years to come.

•

Lefty Arp is run off the range as a killer—and must defeat the schemes of a desperate outlaw pack before he can clear his blackened name in

RIDER OUTLAWED

A SMASHING COMPLETE NOVELET

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Coming in the Next Issue!

Billy Bates pressed trigger and his ball found its mark

DRUMS OF WAR

By SCOTT CARLETON

When Apaches and Navajos prepare for battle, Buffalo Billy Bates acts swiftly to forestall a reign of death and terror!

BILLY BATES was riding a trail of blood-shed and sorrow, and his face was grave as he sat his deep-chested Morgan horse in the shadow of the ancient cave-dwellings on the Enchanted Mesa. Open warfare threatened between the Navajos and Apaches of the high desert country, and if it burst into flame, the work of the white man would have been done in vain.

A bluejay circled high above a little valley, and as the young white hunter watched, the bird began to scream. Almost instantly the savage roar of a heavy rifle shattered the mile-high stillness, and the sound came from a little canyon valley over to the left.

Billy Bates was a veteran of the long trails at twenty-two, and he had been taught to read all the signs. He had been raised among the Indians at old Santa Fe and Taos, later becoming the protege of Colonel William Cody who was known to white men and red as Buffalo Bill.

Billy Bates rode to the edge of the little canyon and tied his bay horse to a springy sapling. A heavy Sharps rifle was in his strong brown hands as he kept to cover and started into the canyon. On his right leg, a new .45 Colt six-shooter was snugged down in a cowskin holster.

Dressed in the fringed buckskins of the

plains, Billy Bates blended with the dull colors of sand and sage.

Billy Bates made no sound as he stalked through the under-growth on moccasined feet. His tawny eyes were narrowed and watchful, but the early morning stillness was not disturbed. Then from the far western end of the mesa, the bluejays again began to chatter a warning. Something had disturbed them, and whatever it was, the intruder was far from the scene where the rifle had been fired.

In this land of far distances and oppressive silences, the hunter learns the language of nature. Now Billy Bates threw caution aside as he straightened to his full six feet and ran swiftly through the narrowing canyon. He stopped abruptly when he saw the body of an Indian lying among the litter of a camp-site, and the bleeding wound in the left breast told a graphic story.

Billy Bates approached slowly and stood looking down at the dead man. The clothing and equipment told him that the dead brave was a Navajo. A heavy woven blanket was partly in the smouldering ashes of a cooking fire, and caught in the fringes was a tiny steel hammer. A few fragments of turquoise matrix were scattered about the looted camp, and Bates kicked the Navajo blanket aside and stamped upon the smouldering wool.

"Looks like a silversmith," Bates murmured to himself, as men will do who spend much time alone in the wasteland. "Whoever murdered him stole all his jewelry."

OFTEN Billy Bates had watched the Navajo silversmiths work their cunning with silver and turquoise. He circled the campsite searching for sign, and his lip curled with disappointment when he saw some scuffed marks where a branch had been used to destroy evidence. Following the trail toward the place where the bluejays had last given warning, the young white hunter pounced upon the worn moccasin caught between two sharp stones.

"Apache moccasin," Billy Bates murmured, as he studied the bead work on the footgear. Something glimmered under the yellow rays of the morning sun, and reaching down, Billy Bates picked up a silver ring with a thunder bird, shaped cunningly with turquoise.

Billy Bates stopped his search and hastened back to the place where he had left his horse. A few moments later he was riding swiftly to a cave where a beautiful pinto stallion was waiting impatiently. The pinto carried a light pack, and whinnied a welcome to the bay which was its constant companion.

Bates untied the picket rope and tucked it under the pack. Then he nudged the bay with a heel, rode swiftly up the trail leading to the mesa, and the pinto followed like a dog. He reached the place where the jays had screamed a warning, and though he circled for sign, he found nothing to reward his efforts.

An hour had passed since that savage murder shot, and Billy Bates jerked up his head when the low murmuring beat of a drum sounded from the Enchanted Mesa. Indian drums speak a language to those who can understand, and now the drum was beating out a message of terrible anger.

Billy Bates listened and understood. A band of Navajos had found the body of the murdered silversmith, and they had also found the Apache moccasin. More than that, they had seen the tracks of a tall bay horse ridden by a young white man who was very tall, and who wore moccasins.

Billy Bates had taken no precautions to cover his trail, and the Navajos would follow his sign like trained hounds. He knew that they would not listen to any explanations, and Billy Bates sent his bay horse up the trail. An hour later he was riding in Apache country, and his keen eyes saw a tall column of smoke rise from a high point to the west.

Billy Bates watched the smoke for a tense moment, and his rugged face darkened with anger. The smoke signals were being made by an Apache who was telling the news that a member of the tribe had been ambushed and killed. Then a drum began to talk in the distance, and another column of smoke rose in the blue sky to the east.

Billy Bates read the signs and tightened his grip on the heavy rifle. The Navajos and Apaches were declaring war on each other, and he was between the two groups. He knew that keen eyes were reading those smoke messages and keen ears were deciphering the code of the war drums.

Of the two, Billy Bates would have preferred to take his chances with the Navajos who had been his boyhood playmates. But now the Navajos thought he was mixed up in the killing of the silversmith, and they would demand a blood payment. Between the two dangers, the lesser would be with the warlike Apaches of the great desert plains.

Billy Bates made up his mind and rode swiftly toward the west. He knew that any attempt at concealment would be wasted, because sentries would be posted on the high

places, and they could scan the country for miles in every direction. He also knew that his coming was expected when he saw the single feathers in the scalp-locks of a group of Indians riding toward him across a wind-swept mesa.

Billy Bates held up his right hand in the sign of peace. His long brown hair swept his broad shoulders as he shook his head and settled the black beaver hat firmly. Then he was surrounded by the mounted Apaches who waited for him to speak.

"I come in peace, my red brothers," Billy Bates spoke in the Apache tongue. "The Great White Father says you must not paint for war!"

"Him Chief Long Hair," a tall brave grunted. "Him friend to Navajos who have killed Strong Bear!"

"My red brother does not speak with the single tongue," Billy Bates answered clearly. "The Navajos say the Apaches have killed Silver Bird who makes the jewelry."

THE black eyes of the tall brave flashed with anger.

"Navajos lie!" he cried. "Mebbe so white man kill Silver Bird."

"Mebbe so," Billy Bates answered quietly, but his eyes narrowed as the circle of braves began to close in on him. "Silver Bird was robbed of much silver."

"He was killed with big thunder stick," the Apache spokesman said accusingly. "Chief Long Hair have thunder stick!"

"My rifle has not been fired today," Billy Bates explained.

"Me Talking Wolf," the Apache introduced himself. "I will look at your thunder stick!"

Billy Bates started to hand over the rifle, and then he suddenly drew back. The Apaches were armed with bows and arrows, and long hunting lances. If he surrendered the rifle, he would never recover it.

"You can see from where you are," Billy Bates said grimly, in the Apache tongue. "Do not come any closer!"

Talking Wolf grunted an order when Billy Bates shoved the heavy Sharps down into a saddle-scabbard. Several Indians moved swiftly and fitted feathered shafts to their hunting bows. Billy Bates dropped his right hand and drew his new six-shooter.

"If they shoot me, I will kill you, Talking Wolf," he promised quietly. "I have the new thunder stick which speaks six times with the voice of death. I have spoken!"

Talking Wolf hesitated and shook his head savagely. His companions lowered their bows, and Billy Bates waited with his six-shooter cocked and ready for war.

"You ride east," Talking Wolf said sullenly.

Billy Bates shook his head, and his long hair touched his shoulders. "I ride north," he contradicted. "The Navajos are angry, but I will find this killer!"

Beady eyes watched as Billy Bates backed the bay horse and rode away at a walk. They knew the range of the thunder-stick in his steady right hand, and they also knew of the prowess of the young white chief who had dared to defy them.

Before he was out of sight, Billy Bates heard the beat of the Apache war drums. They were sending a message about him to their tribesmen who would know his description wherever they could hear the talk of the drums. Then the Navajo drums began to talk from the east, and Billy Bates knew that for him, escape was impossible.

At noon, hours afterward, the sensitive ears of the Morgan horse pricked forward as he heard some sound which eluded his master. Billy Bates followed the pointing ears, and he caught a glimpse of the white flag of a deer as it slipped silently into a bracken thicket. The short hairs began to rise at the back of the white hunter's neck, and he reined the Morgan suddenly to the side.

The roar of a heavy rifle blasted the hot midday stillness and sent echoing waves from the surrounding cliffs. Billy Bates saw a plume of smoke rising from a little shelf high above the trail. Then he heard the retreating beat of a running horse's hoofs. He thought he had detected a single feather above the brush, but the distance was too great for certainty.

The bullet had missed him only by inches.

Grim-faced and filled with a stubborn anger, Billy Bates turned his horse and started to climb. It was some minutes later when he rode out on the little shelf where the ambusher had hidden, and this time Bates found the brass case from a Henry buffalo gun. He also found the sign where a tethered horse had been hidden, and a few stray hairs had been rubbed on a mesquite bush.

"Riding a roan long-legged horse," the young white hunter read the sign. "And whoever it was knows how to fine the sights on that old buffalo rifle."

Billy Bates had hidden the pinto stallion in a brush-choked cave with which the high mesa country was honeycombed. Several times he had seen lonely sentries skylined on high shelves, but up to now he had avoided detection. He knew that he would

have little chance in the daylight, but at night, he could perhaps find out something about the mysterious killer.

BILLY BATES had thought the matter over, and he was sure that some disgruntled renegade was fomenting trouble between the two Indian tribes. The lands of the Apaches were in the west, running into the territory of Arizona. The Navajos grazed their sheep on their own ranges mostly in New Mexico, and except for sporadic fights between small groups, the two tribes were at peace.

It was a simple matter to follow the tracks of the running horse, and Billy Bates rode with his rifle ready for a shot. Now he was on the rim of a large plateau, and down below a Navajo herdsman was tending a flock of sheep.

Billy Bates slid from the saddle and bellied down to watch the solitary Indian. He saw the flash of the sun on metal over to his left, and then Bates made out the head and shoulders of a man. A man who wore a buckskin shirt, with a single eagle feather in the long black hair.

Billy Bates shoved the long barrel of his rifle ahead and sighted quickly. He pressed trigger just as another rifle bellowed, and a yell of pain told Bates that his ball had found the mark.

But that wasn't all. The Navajo herder down in the valley had fallen to the ground, and the sheep were running in circles. A gray dog barked and circled the flock, and then Billy Bates again heard the running thud of hoofs. The ambusher was gone when Bates rode over, but a sigh of satisfaction burst from his lips when he saw the discarded rifle lying among the rocks.

Billy Bates dismounted and picked up the heavy weapon. His bullet had struck the breech to ruin the gun, and a few spots of blood showed that the ambusher had been hit. Bates knew that the wound must have been slight, else the killer would not have escaped so quickly.

He shoved the broken rifle down into his scabbard, turned his horse, and followed a twisting trail to the valley floor below. The Navajo herder was sitting up, but a trail of blood told of a grievous wound.

"Chief Long Hair is your friend," Billy Bates called from a distance.

"I am glad," a voice answered, and Billy Bates sent his horse forward at a run for the voice was that of a girl.

"Happy Flower!" he cried, as he recognized the Navajo maid. "Are you hurt bad?"

The Indian girl studied his face for a long moment. She was perhaps eighteen, and her face was drawn with pain.

"Why did you shoot Happy Flower, Chief Long Hair?" she asked reproachfully. "I hear the war drums, and you killed Silver Bird!"

"I did not kill your tribesman," Billy Bates said earnestly. "Look, Happy Flower. This is the gun which shot you. A man was hiding up on the rim, and I saw him just before he shot. You can see where my bullet hit his gun!"

"Then you save my life," the girl answered. "Let me see the thunder stick."

Billy Bates handed over the captured weapon, and the girl examined the polished stock. She pointed to some carving, and asked Billy Bates what they meant.

"Those are the initials of a name," Bates explained. "J.C. Do you know any one whose name begins with J?"

"I do not understand the talking letters," Happy Flower answered. "None of my people have such a thunder stick, so the man who shot at me must have been an Apache."

Billy Bates frowned and asked the girl how badly she was hurt. She pointed to her left ankle, and Bates ground-tied the bay with trailing reins. Then he shook his head as he examined the wound.

"The bone is not broken, but you cannot walk," he said slowly. "I will make a bandage, and I will take you to your people."

"They will kill you, Chief Long Hair," the girl protested. "If I had the drum, I could send them a message."

Billy Bates cut strips from a blanket and bound up the wound. He did not speak until he helped the girl to her feet.

"I will take you to Navajos," he said gruffly. "When we get close to their camp, I will send you alone on my horse. Tell Swift Deer to come alone to meet me, and we will hunt down the killer of Silver Bird!"

SILENTLY the Navajo maid leaned against Billy Bates, and suddenly the broken gun lifted in her hands. She did not speak, but when Bates turned his head, he saw an Apache brave near a clump of creosote bush, and the brave was drawing his bow for a shot.

"Drop that bow, Talking Wolf!" Billy Bates ordered sternly, and he drew his six-shooter.

"Me hear thunder sticks," the Apache muttered. "You try to kill Navajo squaw. White man no good!"

Billy Bates held the drop with his six-

shooter, but he held out the captured rifle with his left hand.

"Come close and look at this thunder stick," he invited Talking Wolf. "This is the one which shot Happy Flower, but the killer escaped."

"No like pale face," the Apache grunted, but he came forward and took the rifle.

His face changed expression when he fingered the carved initials.

"Joe," the Apache burst out. "Thunder stick belong white man Joe."

"An Indian shot that gun," Billy Bates said quietly. "One eagle feather in his hair!"

"No Injun!" Talking Wolf contradicted fiercely. "Apache wear eagle feather in hair, but Apache got no thunder stick like this!"

Billy Bates did not argue. He knew of many cases where white men had been ambushed and killed, and their weapons stolen by renegade Indians. Happy Flower watched the two men and made a suggestion.

"If our people meet in council and talk?"

"War drums talk!" the Apache said sullenly, and they heard the beat of distant drums to the south.

"I speak with the single tongue, Talking Wolf," Billy Bates said sternly. "Silver Bird of the Navajos has been killed. The Apache brave, Strong Bear, is dead. Tell your tribe to wait until the moon rises, and I will try to find the killer!"

"You kill Silver Bird!" the Apache accused. "You take silver and blankets. Mebbe so you kill Strong Bear too!"

Billy Bates pointed to the captured rifle. He explained that he had shot to save Happy Flower, and the Navajo girl nodded her head emphatically.

"Mebbe so we wait for moon-rise," Talking Wolf agreed sullenly. "Chief Long Hair always talk with single tongue."

He turned abruptly and stalked away without looking back. Billy Bates helped Happy Flower to the saddle and she slid behind the cantle. He mounted the bay, and Bates rode to the south. His strong face did not show the doubt he felt, and it was mid-afternoon when he dismounted and handed the bridle-reins to the girl.

"Ride on and tell Swift Deer to ride out alone to meet me. He will bring my horse, and tell him to send the message to his people."

After a time Swift Deer came riding back alone and leading the bay Morgan horse. He scowled when Billy Bates rose up from behind a clump of sage, but the young white hunter smiled and held up his hand in the sign of peace. The Navajo grunted and muttered his thanks for the care of Happy Flower.

"She is to be my squaw," the Navajo said simply. "Happy Flower say Chief Long Hair speak with the single tongue. We ride fast now!"

"You know white man Joe?" Billy Bates asked quietly.

"We ride and see white man Joe," Swift Deer answered sullenly. "Him trade with Navajos."

Billy Bates knew of the wandering traders who trafficked with the Indians for blankets and silver jewelry. They bartered silk and calico for the squaws, and sometimes bad whisky for the braves. An hour later the Navajo pointed to the signs of hoofs, and Billy Bates saw several horses picketed in a little grassy pocket.

Here was a camp of more or less permanence as evidenced by a small canvas tent and a fireplace made of piled rocks. The horse sign was several days old, and a little stream trickled down from a higher shelf.

AT THAT instant the keen eyes of Billy Bates saw a flash of metal in the dying rays of the setting sun. He threw himself from his horse, but Swift Deer grunted and clutched his shoulder. A hunting arrow was driven into the hard muscles, and from high on the mesa, a ringing scream of defiance echoed down to the valley.

"Apache!" Swift Deer burst out. "They have killed White Joe!"

Billy Bates knew that pursuit would be useless. He told Swift Deer to take a deep breath, and then the white hunter broke the long shaft of the hunting arrow. He worked the steel point from the skin where it had almost been driven through, and Swift Deer sighed deeply.

Billy Bates made a simple bandage from a piece of cloth near the tent. Then he entered with the Navajo at his heels. Two heavy pack saddles stood near a pile of blankets, and Bates dumped them on the ground. Swift Deer stared at the cascading tumble of silver jewelry.

"Indians kill white Joe," he repeated. "Same Injun kill Silver Bird. Him Apache, and Navajo make war!"

"Not until moonrise," Billy Bates warned sternly. "You have spoken, and Talking Wolf has given his word!"

"I take jewelry back," Swift Deer said tonelessly. "When the moon comes up, the drums of war will talk!"

Twilight came to the high mesa to paint

the land with a magic brush. High up on the sides of the cliffs, Billy Bates could see the ladders and open doorways of the ancient mountain dwellers who had made the deep caves their homes. Waterfalls also trickled down the steep slopes, turning red and gold in the fading sunset. This was the Enchanted Mesa of Navajo lore.

Billy Bates had been following the trail of a big horse which had covered the ground with long-legged strides. His own safety depended on capturing the killer who had started another war between the Apaches and the Navajos. Both tribes had agreed to postpone hostilities until the rise of the moon, and only his reputation for honesty and fearlessness had given Billy Bates the few hours for which he had asked.

Talking Wolf would lead his Apache braves into battle and Swift Deer would deploy the Navajos to meet the attack. Both would also hunt down the young white hunter who was under suspicion, and Billy Bates frowned as he narrowed his eyes to stare at the ancient dwellings high up on the cliff.

Something moved in the deeper shadows, and Bates made out the lighter outlines of a horse. Keeping to the shadows at the base of the cliff, Bates rode toward a break in the trail. There he ground-tied the Pinto stallion to which he had changed his saddle. Then he was climbing the ancient trail on foot.

The light was almost gone when he came to a broad shelf and saw the horse in a little goat-corral of piled stones. The animal was a long legged roan, wet with sweat, and carrying a worn saddle.

Billy Bates crept forward in the gloom. His face hardened when he discovered a few drops of dried blood on the saddle-leather. The Indians rode bare-back with a single rope tied around the bellies of their mounts. When they needed both hands, the Indian braves thrust their knees under the rope for security.

Directly opposite from the horse, Billy Bates stared at the opening of a large room in the cliff. His tawny eyes widened when he saw a single feather against the frame, head-high to a tall man. For a moment the young white hunter studied the feather from his hiding place. Then he removed his black beaver hat and placed it on a stunted bush at a level with his head.

Crouching low, Billy Bates pushed the hat forward until it slanted out above the narrow trail. The heavy roar of a rifle shattered the twilight stillness, and the beaver hat jumped from the bush and fell into the fringing brush.

MOVING as quietly as a mountain cat, Billy Bates crept towards the darkened doorway. His pistol was in his right hand as he hugged the rocky wall. A shadow lanced out from the cave, grew incredibly long, and then a man stepped out with his rifle ready for a shot.

Billy Bates did not move his moccasined feet. His right hand slapped down as he used the heavy Colt six-shooter for a club. The long barrel crashed down on a black head, and the skulking ambusher crumpled to the shaly trail with the rifle thudding to the ground.

Billy Bates grunted as he turned the unconscious figure over. Then he was staring into a dark face framed with long black hair. The face was that of a white man darkened by wind and sun, but the buckskin shirt and pants were those of an Apache. A darker stain was prominent low down on the left side of the shirt, and Bates lifted the buckskin for closer examination.

A sigh escaped his lips as he saw the dead white skin, and across the left ribs was the unmistakable scrape of a heavy bullet. Bates raised his head and stared at the eagle feather which had been stuck into the side of the open doorway. That feather had been a decoy to draw his fire, but the renegade white man had fallen into the same kind of a trap. He had fired at the white hunter's beaver hat, and had slipped out to make sure of his deadly aim.

Billy Bates drew his keen bladed hunting knife and cut strips from the unconscious man's shirt.

Then he bound the grimy hands securely, led the roan horse out of the goat corral, and lifted his captive to the worn saddle. After tying the limp feet with a rope passed under the belly of the roan, Bates also tied the bound hands to the saddle horn. Soon he was leading the horse down the trail to the place where he had left the pinto stallion.

Night had closed in to shroud the high desert with a velvety blackness in which the sleepy notes of birds mingled with the hum of night insects. The meeting of the Navajo council was two hours distant, but Billy Bates rode at a walk as he led the rangy roan.

Sky-lined against the leaden horizon, an Indian brave stood sentinel as Billy Bates reached the south end of the Enchanted Mesa. A single drum began to boom softly in the distance, but its muted tones spoke a

message that would be plain to all within hearing. It warned that moonrise was less than an hour away, and Billy Bates smiled grimly as he rode into the little canyon where the Indian Trader had made his camp.

Bates dismounted and felt inside the tent. He sighed with relief when his groping fingers found a small drum he had seen that afternoon. Placing it between his knees, the white hunter rapped out a message with a knobby stick. A voice spoke hoarsely from the darkness.

"You're Chief Long Hair—Billy Bates?"

"So you quit sleeping," Bates said quietly. "Is your first name Joe?"

"Joe Coster, that's me," the prisoner answered quickly. "You're making a big mistake, Bates. I saw that big Apache brave what killed Silver Bird, and he stole my roan hoss. I found it up there on the mesa, and I thought you was him."

Billy Bates smiled grimly in the darkness. He said nothing about the trader's flesh wound, but he mounted the pinto stallion and rode out of the canyon. Joe Coster pleaded softly to have his hands released, but Bates made no reply.

"I found a ledge of silver, Bates," Coster whispered, after a long silence. "It's on Injun land, but if they got to fighting among themselves, a couple of white men could make a rich haul. Turn me loose and I'll cut you in for half!"

"It lacks only a few minutes to moonrise," Billy Bates said sternly. "Listen!"

Silence for a moment with only the soft creak of saddle leather whispering above the night noises. Then the faint echoing beat of a war-drum began to throb out a message. The two white men listened and Joe Coster pleaded hoarsely.

"Don't take me to that council, Billy Bates. That was the Navajos, and they were telling you to ride in with your prisoner!"

"That's right," Billy Bates agreed. "I knew you could read the drum talk when I saw the drum in your tent. Now we will ride, and you can save your breath for the council."

* * * * *

FLICKERING flames began to leap high on the little mesa where Billy Bates had found the body of the Navajo silversmith. The two horses were climbing the twisting trail, and Billy Bates pulled his beaver hat low to shade his eyes. He could hear the murmuring whisper of guttural voices, and then there was silence when the pinto stallion walked out on the mesa in the firelight.

Billy Bates saw the Navajo braves gathered on one side of the fire. On the opposite side sat Talking Wolf with one Apache brave. This was the medicine man, and he held a war drum between his knees. The old Indian magician lowered his stick when Billy Bates appeared with his prisoner on the tall roan horse.

Swift Deer arose and walked closer to the fire. He watched as Billy Bates dismounted and freed the feet of his prisoner. Joe Coster stared at the gathering of Navajos and went to his knees.

"I didn't kill Silver Bird!" he said in the Navajo tongue. "It was a big Apache brave!"

"White man lie!" Talking Wolf said gruffly.

"This man should have a fair trial," Billy Bates announced clearly. "No one saw him kill Silver Bird and none saw the death of Strong Bear, our Apache brother!"

"Where you catch?" Swift Deer demanded.

Billy Bates told his story simply, and without dramatics. He told of the eagle feather in the doorway of the Cliff Dwellers on the Enchanted Mesa. He told of using his hat for a decoy, and held the flat beaver up so that all could see the holes scored by the rifle bullets.

Swift Deer reached down and took the captured rifle from the white hunter's saddle. He showed it to Joe Coster, pointed to the carved initials, and the trader began to talk rapidly.

"My horse and rifle were stolen," Coster insisted.

"We find the silver in your teepee," Swift Deer said sternly.

"It was planted there!" Coster whispered hoarsely.

Swift Deer turned and pointed to a blanket. Billy Bates saw Happy Flower for the first time, and her right ankle was heavily bandaged.

"Happy Flower is my squaw now," Swift Deer said proudly. "The evil one who killed Silver Bird and Strong Bear, also tried to kill Happy Flower. They were all shot with the same gun."

"That gun was stolen!" Joe Coster answered.

"Chief Long Hair shot that gun from the killer's hand," Swift Deer stated sternly. "The killer was wounded."

"You see my hands," Coster shouted. "There is no wound."

"The killer was lying down." Swift Deer then proceeded to build up his case. He

stepped swiftly to the roan horse on which Coster was sitting, flipped up the renegade's buckskin shirt, and pointed to the wound where the bullet from Billy Bates' gun had scraped the ribs.

Joe Coster took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. Before any could devine his intent, his heels kicked the horse savagely. The roan leaped forward like an arrow from a bow, and only Talking Wolf and the old Apache medicine man were the only ones who barred his way.

Like water dividing before the prow of a canoe, the two Apaches threw themselves aside. The roan horse leaped high in the firelight, and was swallowed up by the outer darkness. Seconds later the silent listeners heard a rattling crash from the deep canyon below.

"He had the white man's trial," Swift Deer said solemnly. "The blood of Silver Bird is avenged!"

"Strong Bear will find the Happy Hunting Ground," Talking Wolf added.

"It is well, my brothers," Billy Bates said in a hushed voice. "You will dwell together in peace. The drums will remain silent." As he spoke, he pointed to the two big drums on opposite sides of the fire, and then at the moon which was coming up over the eastern mountains.

"Send a message of peace now," Billy Bates told Talking Wolf. "You will not need the drums of war!"

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CHAPTER I

Death Trap

THAT night an icy wind roared across the Texas Llano Estacado, carrying dust in its roiling wake and hinting of snow. Across the high plains it gathered momentum, shrieking over the Caprock into the broad expanse of Palo Duro Canyon below.

Beneath the canyon rim, Palo Pinto town squatted like a frightened, cowering beast. From the towering escarpments the wind, wailing its symphony of death in weird cacophony, swept down into the town. In the rim-rock a coyote yapped forelornly, its cry smothered in the storm.

Beneath a shelving rock, miles above Palo Pinto, a young outlaw, known only as the Kid, and four other men hunkered about a small campfire. The Kid rose, lithe as a puma, went to where the trail dipped down into the impenetrable darkness. Among some huge boulders close by, the men's

ground, beaten and bloody

GUNMAN

By
LARRY A. HARRIS

saddled horses moved restlessly.

When the Kid returned to the fire he remained standing. Doc Castro, his sunken-cheeked face a pallid mask in the folds of his sheepskin collar, looked up.

"Any sign of him, Kid?" he asked.

The Kid shooked his head. "Frenchy," stocky and squint-eyed, tossed another stick on the fire. Beside him a killer called "Buffalo," shaggy-maned and giantlike, stared at the flames as he warmed his big hands. Mendez, a breed, watched and listened, his swarthy face etched with cruelty and cunning.

Doc Castro took a pack of greasy cards from his pocket. He shuffled them, his long bony fingers moving expertly.

"A game while we wait, fellow banditti?" he asked. "Or as the bard said—"

"Shut up, Doc!" Frenchy rasped. "We're sick of yore high-falutin' talk."

Doc Castro smiled like a corpse. Every man in the bunch knew this strange little outlaw was living on borrowed time. Wanted.

Kid Battles to Work Out His Redemption!

for a dozen murders, Doc Castro spoke like a college professor, loved horses, and killed without qualm. For years he had ridden with "Cherokee Bill" Bartlett's outlaw bunch, scoffing at the laws of God and man, laughing at death, and coughing his life away.

"Then, fellow ruffians," he said, "I shall sit in sober contemplation until your vile temper cools, Frenchy."

DOC CASTRO looked up at the Kid, grinned. The Kid shook his head. He felt the same tension that gripped the other men. There had always been discord between the uncouth Frenchy and Doc Castro. And Doc, primed for violence, was asking for a showdown.

"Cut it, Doc," the Kid said quietly.

Doc Castro chortled mirthlessly. "A very wise man once said, 'Ye have made your way from the worm to man, and much within you is still worm.' Nietzsche said that, Frenchy."

Snarling, Frenchy leaped to his feet, right hand slashing down to the butt of his gun. Doc Castro, rocking back on his heels, was meeting the draw. Standing over them, the Kid had the advantage. Gun drawn, he faced the pack.

"Hold it, all of yuh!" he rapped. "Get yore hand away from yore gun, Frenchy. Pap will be here in a while. Yuh'll get a chance mebbe to do a lot of shootin' then."

The Kid meant business. He was as tough and fearless as the old lobo wolf who had sired him. Beneath the brim of his hat his eyes were slits of flame. Slowly the men's hands came away from their guns. The deadly tension eased. But the Kid, wise beyond his years, knew there was blood on the moon.

Mendez, the breed, stood listening. He was first to hear the approaching rider. The Kid had his six-shooter pouched when Cherokee Bill Bartlett rode into the circle of firelight. He was a huge man, powerfully built, beyond his prime. His black hair and high cheek-bones told of Indian blood.

"What's the matter, Kid?" he rumbled.

The Kid grinned. "Nothin', Pap," he said.

Big Cherokee Bill Bartlett glared at his men.

"Cut out the squabblin' among yoreselves, boys!" he boomed. "After tonight we're all pullin' together, or separatin'. I'm roddin' this outfit. It was me that framed this deal in Palo Pinto. Everything is all cut and dried."

"Just who is this old pard of yores down there, Bartlett?" Buffalo grumbled. "Yuh're bankin' a heap on him."

Cherokee Bill Bartlett dismounted stiffly. Briefly he explained the deal. There was no possible hitch in the plans, he said. The sheriff was out of town. The bank door lock was already jimmied, and the bank safe was a tin can affair, easily pried open.

"Forget who the jigger is who's workin' with us, Buffalo," he snapped. "Down there folks think he's honest. But I knew him when he hid out with the owls. We're to meet him in Pinky's Bar in Tascosa one week from tonight. He's to get half the haul."

Frenchy scowled. "Don't sound too good to me, Bartlett."

Cherokee Bill's eyes thinned. "Losin' yore nerve, Frenchy?"

"I'll match mine with yores any time, Bartlett!"

Cherokee Bill grinned. "That's the way I like to hear yuh talk, Frenchy. Bueno, boys, get yore hosses. Let's ride!"

The Kid went with the other men to their horses. As they hit leather, Cherokee Bill rode up among them. He gave final instructions. He, Frenchy and Buffalo would go into the bank. The Kid, Doc and Mendez would act as look-outs.

Cherokee Bill led the way down the dark trail. Behind him rode the other men—men whose bodies felt shrunken from lack of food, eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep, flesh and bones wracked and tormented by endless riding. Men, the dregs of a wild frontier, following Cherokee Bill with his promise of easy cash, hating him, fearing him, yet afraid to turn back. There was no quitting the bunch.

Since the Kid could remember it had been the same: riding by night, hiding by day. Hounding posses and flaming guns; lawlessness and unbridled passions in men. Death was not new to him. Hunger he had known, the excruciating pain and nausea of a leg wound when his horse stumbled in a stage robbery getaway. Loneliness was constantly his saddle-mate, despite Doc Castro's proffer of companionship.

Tough and hard was the Kid. Doc Castro had taught him to read and write, had taught him to draw and shoot with amazing speed. And from Cherokee Bill he had inherited the outlaw leader's blind disregard for law, his fierce pride and reckless daring. Branded deep in the Kid was the outlaw code: kill or be killed.

Yet by some miracle the Kid had never killed. The time would come, he knew. He had never been close to Cherokee Bill. He had no desire to change things now. But a year ago it had been different. He had

argued with Cherokee Bill then to quit the out-trail after a big haul. He, Doc and Cherokee Bill could go to Mexico, buy a ranch, the Kid pointed out.

CHEROKEE BILL had shaken his head. "Once a lobo always one, Kid," he had said queerly. "There's no such thing as changin' me now. With you it's different. We've got some money now. You and Doc take it. Doc will take yuh into the nearest big town, buy yuh fine clothes and set yuh up in one of them boardin' schools. I'd like for yuh to go straight, Kid."

It was the first time Cherokee Bill had ever talked like that. The Kid had thought hard for a moment.

"If it's too late for you to change," he had said then, slowly, "the same goes for me. Reckon I'll stick with the bunch, Pap."

Cherokee Bill had walked away, strangely silent. That had been the Indian in him, the Kid reckoned. He had wondered if his mother had been that way. Later, he had asked Doc Castro about it. The Kid hadn't known that Cherokee Bill was within earshot, listening. Nor had he seen the two men exchange quick, meaningful glances.

"I'd suggest you ask your Pap about things like that, Kid," Doc Castro had said. "All I know is what Bill has already told you."

"I'm part Indian, ain't I?" the Kid had asked.

"Aren't is the proper verb, Kid."

With that, Doc Castro had turned and walked away. . . .

Now the Kid rode at the rear of the string of horsemen. The trail dipped down, wound past huge boulders and weird formations of limestone. Out of the black night, muffled by the howling wind, came the chop of hoofs, the creak of gear.

A current of uneasiness touched the Kid's nerves. The sand-laden wind beat at him, stung his face. He tried to shut from his mind all thoughts of food and rest. Bitter rebellion rose in him when he thought of the comfort and security of other men—honest men. Yet he'd had his chance. And turned it down.

"Once a lobo always one, Kid," Cherokee had said.

The Kid grimaced, teeth chattering from the cold. He tugged his hat lower, lifted the collar of his worn sheepskin. Just ahead of him Doc Castro and the other riders were vague shadows. Then Doc turned, his face a pale mask in the darkness.

"Into the Valley of Death rode the six hundred," he called back. "Only in this case there are only six of us."

Cherokee Bill's command for silence sheered through the storm. They reached the canyon floor and broke into a lope. The same tugging of unrest grew in the Kid. A clammy, cold feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. He spurred up to Doc Castro's side. He knew the outlaws ahead couldn't hear him.

"Doc," the Kid said hoarsely, "I'm scared."

It was the first time in his life the Kid had ever admitted fear.

Doc Castro's sardonic sense of humor was gone. His eyes were on the Kid, feverish, speculative.

"It's funny, Kid," he said, so low the others couldn't hear. "So am I."

He laughed then. And the Kid forced a grin, even though fear was squeezing his heart dry.

Lights of the town sprang up in the blackness ahead. On the outskirts of the town they pulled off into some high brush. Cherokee Bill gave final instructions, then rode on alone. Frenchy and Buffalo followed.

"Come on, Kid, you and Mendez," Doc Castro said after a few minutes.

They rode into the main street. There were houses on both sides. Lamplight shone feebly at some of the windows. Yonder, in the center of town, the weather-beaten store fronts were dark. Only a saloon showed signs of life. Yellow light speared from its windows, out to the hitchpole where several horses stood. But no one was in sight.

The shrieking wind lifted a curtain of dust from the street. The Kid's head moved from side to side. Threat of danger and violence seemed to hover over the town like some great black vulture.

The Kid's heart pounded as they passed the saloon. Diagonally across the street was the bank. Shadows moved in the darkened doorway. That, the Kid knew, would be Cherokee Bill, Frenchy and Buffalo. He pulled over in front of the bank, stopped. Doc Castro slowly rode on. Mendez remained with the Kid.

ABOVE the storm the Kid heard Cherokee Bill's muffled curse. Tides of alarm suddenly streaked through the Kid. Some alien sound, man-made and startling, came from a nearby lane. He whirled, six-shooter palmed. Then his warning shout was drowned in the blast of guns.

Palo Pinto town exploded wide open in a din of flaming guns and yelling men. Out of black lanes and doorways came crouched

and shooting figures, closing in for the kill. And in that blinding heart-tick, the Kid's horse shuddered, fell. In a hail of lead the Kid pitched into the dust of the street.

Senses reeling, he jerked to his knees, cursing and shooting at the shadows. As if in a horrible nightmare he saw Cherokee Bill stagger out to the walk, both guns flaming. Then the big outlaw's knees buckled and he went down, dead. Buffalo and Frenchy were both done for. Mendez, screaming curses in Spanish, suddenly toppled from the back of his bolting horse.

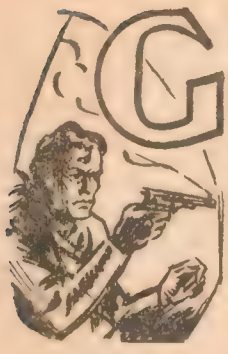
In that chaos of dust and din, the Kid leaped to his feet as the breed's horse swept past. Frantically he grabbed at the kak horn. Then he was in the saddle, bent low. In a hail of lead he roared past the saloon, past the block of window lights. And somehow he won free of the death-trap.

Dry sobs shook the Kid as he spurred beyond the outskirts of the town. At top speed he swerved toward the canyon-gashed hills. The night meant safety for him. But the others, he knew, were dead. All his bitter hate, all his rebel spirit welled up in the Kid in an anguished cry.

"I'll square with 'em, Pap!" he yelled to the rushing wind. "I'll make 'em pay for gunnin' you and Doc!"

CHAPTER II

Escape



GRIEF and shock rode with the Kid. Seeing Cherokee Bill die tonight had put another scar over the Kid's heart that would be a long time in disappearing. He cared not one whit about the other men, except Doc Castro. But in his strange, hard way Cherokee Bill had been kind to the Kid.

For an hour or more the Kid held the killing, reckless pace. Then high in the tumbled hills he halted for a breather. All pursuit was lost, he knew. The lights of the town had vanished in the storm-lashed darkness. But in his own temporary safety the Kid found little comfort.

Sick and half-frozen, he stiffly dismounted. Leading his horse, he stumbled ahead on foot. In the darkness he found an overhanging rocky ledge that afforded some measure of shelter. There, loosening the saddle cinch, he tied the horse to a bush. Then he crawled into the rocky niche and flopped.

For hours he lay there, shivering, listening, afraid to build a fire. Outside the storm raged, the temperature dropped. Again he lived the horrors of tonight's death-trap.

He remembered Cherokee Bill mentioning the former acquaintance of his who had helped frame the bank robbery. That man, whoever he was, had double-crossed the bunch. In the Kid's mind that man represented the law, a law that the Kid hated, feared.

Exhaustion finally claimed the Kid, and he slept. At the crack of day he awoke, so stiff and cold he could hardly move. The storm had abated, but the cold was a wracking torment. A light skift of snow had fallen during the night, blanketing the hills and canyon floor.

Hunger gnawed at the Kid. He was weak and giddy when he rigged his horse. Mounting, he glanced back down at the canyon floor. Another dreary, wintry day was at hand.

Miles across the canyon rose the distant rim-rock wall. Back of him, formidable as a prison barrier, towered the Caprock, rising high above the tumbled hills. There was no timber; only scrub buckbrush and boulders.

With a start the Kid suddenly realized that from the Caprock a look-out could see for miles. Then with a terrifying jolt he remembered Cherokee Bill's warning last night.

"When the job's done we'll have to ride hard and fast, boys," Cherokee Bill had said. "The law can block every road and trail out of the canyon if we give 'em time."

The Kid hadn't paid much attention then. Now a cold clammy fear clutched at his heart. He knew he had been spotted in his escape last night. And the law would never stop until every last man of the outlaw bunch was dead.

The Kid's mind raced as he searched the distant Caprock rim. He spurred his horse through a maze of boulders, up an arroyo, and across a hilltop mesa. For miles he rode, searching frantically for a trail that would lead to the Caprock.

Before him the canyon wall rose to dizzy heights, a solid, perpendicular wall of red rock. Like a cornered coyote, the Kid turned back. Off in the distance, deep in a valley, he spotted some ranch buildings. He spurred off in the opposite direction.

He was just rounding a butte when he saw a lone rider approaching. The Kid's first impulse was to run. Then instinctively his right hand flashed beneath his sheepskin.

His holster was empty. In the getaway last night he had dropped his six-shooter. Panic again seized the Kid, then surprised relief as he saw that the rider was a girl.

"Howdy," she cried, wheeling up close by.

The Kid stared, confused. The girl, bundled in a heavy sheepskin and wearing rough range garb, was about his own age and pretty. Wavy brown hair peeped from beneath her hat brim. Her face was ruddy from the cold.

The Kid, ill at ease, nodded.

"Howdy," he said.

The girl looked the Kid over appraisingly, smiling.

"You from town," she asked, "or just riding through?"

"Ridin' through," said the Kid.

"Hunting work?"

The Kid thought fast, forcing a grin to mask his tension-wrought nerves.

"No work for me, lady. What with the roundup done on Chisum's Turkey Track outfit in the Pecos Valley I'm headin' yonderly—for Tascosa, and mebbe a spree."

The girl looked away, plainly disappointed. Her smile was gone. A haunting worry was in her eyes. With gloved hands she fumbled with a lass-rope tied to the kak horn.

"We need help," she said quietly. "I thought maybe—"

SHE hesitated, and the Kid watched her. His bluff had worked. She had accepted his lie without question. But instead of satisfaction he felt only a rueful discomfort. There was something good, clean and honest about this girl that stirred the Kid.

"That yore ranch over yonder?" he asked, nettled.

The girl nodded. "The Frying Pan outfit. Jim McCarty's my father. We're mighty short-handed. That's why I'm working, rounding up what strays I can find. Dad's in town now looking for hands. We're trail-herding to Dodge in a week, if winter don't beat us."

"A trail herd north, this late?" the Kid snapped.

"It's the only chance, mister."

The Kid shrugged. "I don't want none of it, lady."

He lifted the reins to ride on. The girl bit her lips, her face flushed with anger.

"I didn't suppose you would!" she cried scornfully. "You're like a lot of other men in this canyon? Afraid of hard work, frightened by a little snow. I wish I were a man. I'd—"

She faltered, and her eyes flooded with tears. Then, whirling her horse, she galloped back down the trail. The Kid stared after her, stung to the quick, angry. Gloomily he considered his own plight as he began backtracking. The gnawing hunger inside him now was agony.

The Kid circled the spot where he had camped. Frantically he kept searching the Caprock. Somewhere along here, he knew, was the trail that the bunch had followed into the canyon last night. It was a wild, rugged country of hills and boulders, hemmed in by the canyon walls.

Once, from a high ledge, the Kid spotted the scattered buildings of Palo Pinto in the hazy distance. He strove desperately for his bearings. With each passing hour he knew his chances of escape were lessening. He plunged through rocky crevices, across arroyos, eyes stabbing the rocky wall for an escape trail.

Twice he found deer paths, but they petered out in the rubble at the toe of the cliff. A frigid wind sprang up toward noon, fetching more snow. Sick in body and soul, the Kid wheeled up in a rocky outcropping, the wind and snow lashing at his hunched figure. He heard the pound of hoofs then. Men's voices, muffled by the storm, came to him.

Heart pounding, the Kid flung himself to the ground. He ducked into some scrub brush, crawled to the brink of a rocky ledge. And there he flattened, staring, cursing the fate that had tricked him. Twenty feet below him was the trail he had been searching for!

Four riders, heavily bundled and carrying rifles, were just passing. The man in the lead, a mustached, leathery-faced oldster, had a star pinned on his heavy coat. His voice came clearly above the storm and clump of hoofs.

"Might as well head back for town, boys. We'll take turns of relievin' the lookouts. What with every road and trail guarded we're bound to nail 'em sooner or later."

The words faded as the riders disappeared around a curve in the trail. All hope in the Kid went dead. He knew that one other member of the bunch had escaped the death-trap in Palo Pinto. That man had to be Doc Castro, for the Kid had seen the others die. With all trails blocked the Kid knew they both were trapped.

He returned to his horse. With each passing moment the storm was increasing. Death was waiting for him no matter where he turned. In his misery he tried to think clearly. A plan came to him. On boldness alone he might win. It was a long-shot, a desperate gamble. But all his life the Kid had

bucked the odds—and won. This time he would win, too. He had to!

"Let's go, bronc!" he muttered grimly.

He turned back across the rough country. Once down out of the hills, he spurred his jaded horse into a hard run. Across the open canyon floor he raced. The blinding snow was in his favor, for in all directions, as far as he could see, not a rider was in sight. Yet qualms shook him as he drew nearer the town.

On the outskirts he slowed, circling the outlying houses, keeping to the cover of the high brush. He reached the rear of the buildings in the center of town, confident that he had avoided detection. No challenge greeted him as he pulled up at the rear of a livery stable.

THE Kid's lagging spirits rose. A back door of the livery stable stood partially open. All ice and flame, the Kid swung down, quickly led his horse inside the gloomy barn.

His eyes stabbed the open passageway. Not a soul was in sight. Off to one side were stalls, hay and sacks of feed piled high.

The Kid found an empty stall for his horse. He unrigged, hooking the kak and bridle on a wall peg. Yonder a ladder led to the haymow. The Kid took it, and in the loft he plunged into the hay, wallowing. For long minutes he waited, listening to the stamp of stabled horses below, to the howl of the storm outside.

It was a mad gamble, the Kid knew. Steeling himself for the ordeal ahead, he waited for his horse to cool. Then he climbed over the hay to another ladder. He was in the gloomy passageway, heading boldly toward the front, when an ancient hostler came out of a nearby feed bin.

The oldster stopped, startled.

"What in all thunderation you doin' here?" he barked.

The Kid forced a wry grin, brushing the hay from his coat and simulating sleepiness.

"Might furnish blankets in this hoss hotel," he said, yawning. "I plumb near froze to death last night. Who do I pay for a night's lodgin' for me and my hoss?"

"Hoss?" echoed the hostler. "What hoss?"

The Kid searched the oldster's squint eyes for signs of recognition, but there was none at all.

"The sorrel in the last stall is mine, plumb tuckered an' needin' oats," he said. "When I rode in here at dark last night there was nobody around. So I just kind of helped myself."

It was a shot in the dark with the Kid. The hostler spat into the dust, then grunted:

"And yuh didn't hear the shootin' last night, younker?"

"Shootin'?" the Kid asked innocently.

The hostler's eyes glowed.

"Cherokee Bill Bartlett's outlaw bunch made their last raid. Bartlett and four of his men are dead. Two of 'em got away an' headed for the hills, but they'll shore not get far. Sheriff Matt Trent and half the town are out blockin' the trails and huntin' 'em now. Yuh shore sleep sound, younker."

The Kid grinned. He hadn't heard a sound, he said. He had slept in the hay, too tired to hunt a good meal.

Four days ago he had left Chisum's outfit in the Pecos Valley, heading for the Tascosa country.

"Spree huntin'?" cackled the hostler.

"Nope. Job huntin', mister."

"Huh! Yuh shore won't have trouble findin' work around here, younker—if yuh're big enough across the britches. Jim McCarty of the Fryin' Pan is down at the Staked Plains Saloon now, offerin' top wages for men that'll help him trail-herd north. McCarty's a man-breaker and his foreman is worse. But they'll treat yuh square if yuh got what it takes."

"Sounds good to me," said the Kid.

The hostler stared, and then he wagged his head.

"It's yore hide, not mine, younker. Don't worry about yore hoss. I'll tend to him."

The oldster hobbled along beside the Kid to the front door.

He couldn't get over the abortive bank robbery last night.

"Reckon I was at the meetin' in the saloon last night when yuh rode in," he rambled on. "Monte Siebold and Tas Cofflin was out deer huntin' yesterday. Seems they spotted Cherokee Bill Bartlett's camp and crept close enough to overhear 'em plannin' the bank job. Siebold and his man hightailed back into town. We was waitin' for Bartlett's bunch when they rode in. Blamedest shootin' match ever I seen!"

Anger burned in the Kid, but he hid it well. Here was one of the men who had helped wipe out the bunch. He would meet the others soon, if his scheme worked. Somehow he would square the slate with them. He would sign on with this tough Jim McCarty for the trail drive. Once beyond the reach of the hounding lawmen he would make his break.

Fate, it seemed, was playing into the Kid's hands.

CHAPTER III

Tough Hands Wanted

WAVES of weakness pulsed through the Kid as he went up the street. But he forced a cowboy swagger. Through the falling snow he spotted the bank across the street, and bitterness twisted his lips when he saw where his father had gone down.

A man stepped out of a barber shop, glanced at the Kid, went on. Then the Kid went hot and cold by turns. Just ahead of him was the sheriff's office. Four saddled horses stood at the hitchrack outside. The old mustached lawman was just stepping outside.

There was no turning back for the Kid. He swaggered past, meeting the lawman's swift appraisal with bold recklessness.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he said, and went on.

The Kid tensed for the lawman's shout of recognition. None came. But the Kid knew the sheriff was staring after him. On sheer, cold bluff the Kid was playing his hand.

From a drowsy barman in the saloon the Kid entered he ordered a beer and a bowl of chili. He held to the bar with both hands, struggling against the trembling weakness of his body. Through a back mirror he watched the men near him, listened to their loud talk.

At the end of the bar a hawk-faced man with bulging red-veined eyes stepped over to the pot-bellied stove.

"Yuh ain't got enough money to hire me, McCarty," he sneered. "My cowboyin' days are over as long as there's work in town. Let the fools yuh've already hired buck the trail. Ain't that right, Monte?"

Monte Siebold, whom the Kid knew to be the owner of the Staked Plains Saloon, looked up from his drink. The Kid had seen his type before. Big, thick-shouldered and flashily dressed was Siebold. Square-jawed and beady-eyed, cold and dangerous as a rattler, but a man who could fool people into thinking he was honest.

"McCarty knows what he's doin', Cofflin," Monte Siebold said.

The Kid finished his beer. He was wolfing the chili when another man, obviously a cowpuncher, said:

"Let's go, Jim."

Big Jim McCarty stepped back from the bar. He was a huge man, grizzled and tough as an oak. His sheepskin coat and boots were wet with snow. His shoulders sagged, but his blue eyes smoldered with rage.

"Yuh've bucked me at every turn, Siebold!" he suddenly exploded. "Yuh built up the story that me and my foreman Milt Bain, are man-killers. We work our men hard, but pay 'em big wages. I've hired a dozen men to hit the trail for me. And when my back is turned yuh talk 'em out of it."

"Talkin' a little wild, ain't yuh, McCarty?" Siebold smirked, face darkening.

"If the boot fits, wear it, Siebold!" big Jim McCarty thundered. "I know yuh're out to break me if yuh can. I know yuh'd give yore right arm to get hold of the Fryin' Pan. But, by glory, it's one ranch yuh'll never crook a man out of! I'm trail-herdin' north come rain or snow or high water!"

McCarty was cracking under a terrific strain. Months of worry, and now the rot-gut whisky, were robbing him of caution.

"As for you, Cofflin," he bawled hoarsely, "I want no part of yuh! I hire only men, fightin' men who'll be loyal to their brand!"

The Kid stepped out from the bar. "I'm yore huckleberry then, mister. I'm a tough hand and needin' work."

McCarty whirled to stare dumfoundedly into the Kid's thin-cheeked face. He saw a seedy youth, gaunt as a wolf and hollow-eyed. And McCarty's jaw sagged.

Monte Siebold and Tas Cofflin laughed. Other men at the bar grinned.

"Hire the button, McCarty," Siebold jeered. "He'll make yuh a tough hand."

The Kid's thin face went deathly white. His eyes blazed. A burning, fierce hate flamed through him. He looked at Siebold, the man he knew now had set the death-trap for Cherokee Bill's bunch.

"Keep out of this, Siebold!" he rasped.

The saloonman scowled. "So yuh're really ringy, are yuh, button?" he mocked.

"Ringy enough to take care of you!" the Kid raged.

He didn't see Big Jim McCarty and the Frying Pan cowboy watching. Monte Siebold was striding out from the bar toward him. Siebold's square-jawed face was working, his beady black eyes dangerous.

"I don't let whelps talk like that to me!" he said.

Then he swung!

THE Kid dodged, quick as a panther, but the blow lifted the shapeless hat from his head, caught him on the ear. Pain roared through him as he dropped to one knee and came up swinging blindly. He tried to twist

away from the big saloonman's smashing blows, tried to use all the tricks he had ever learned. But the Kid, weak from exhaustion and hunger, was out-matched from the very first.

Twice the Kid was lucky enough to slam his bony fist through to Siebold's face. Each time Siebold stepped back, unhurt, eyes afire with black hatred. Then he came in like a raging bull, landing blows that jarred the Kid to the base of his spine. The Kid tried fiercely to defend himself. He ducked and swayed, swinging wild, ill-timed blows that packed no power.

The room rocked and rolled redly in front of him. Blood streamed from his nose and every muscle in his trembling body shrieked with pain. He didn't know that Big Jim McCarty was bawling encouragement to him. Nor did he see the sheriff standing in the doorway. To the Kid everything was blurry and indistinct.

"Cuss yuh!" he sobbed. "I'll— I'll—"

Things grew black to the Kid and his world narrowed to a spinning vortex of pounding, punishing darkness. . . .

IT was still hazy to him when he regained consciousness.

He was flat on his back and Sheriff Trent was bending over him. Beside the lawman was Jim McCarty.

"Yuh'd best come with me, son," the lawman was saying grimly. "There's a couple of things I want to ask yuh."

"Which same can be done out at the Fryin' Pan, Matt," McCarty boomed. "Since when has a fight in this rat-hole been agin the law?"

"The feller will bear questionin', Jim," the lawman growled. "Accordin' to Stumpy at the livery stable he rode in—"

"—to hit me for a job," finished the cowman belligerently. "No law agin that either, is there? Take care of yore hunt for the rest of Bartlett's bunch, Matt. I'll care for the youngster. Any half-starved jigger like him that's got the gall to take on Monte Siebold has shore got a job at the Fryin' Pan if he wants it."

"It's yore own responsibility, Jim," the sheriff muttered.

"One more won't hurt, Matt. I'd hire anybody, facin' the tight I'm in." McCarty turned as the Kid got to his feet. "How yuh feelin' about the job now, son?"

The Kid stood on braced legs, reeling and still a little dazed.

"I'll take it, mister!" he croaked.

"Let's go then."

Humiliation went with the Kid as he followed the rancher and cowboy outside. He had taken the worst beating of his life, and from the man who had set a death-trap for Cherokee Bill. Before he left the Palo Duro country the Kid aimed to settle with Monte Siebold.

Despite his weakness and hurts, the Kid forced a swagger. A twinkle came into Jim McCarty's eyes as he nudged the grinning cowboy with him. Leading their own horses, they followed the Kid to the livery stable. While the Kid rigged his horse he saw the hostler take McCarty to one side.

Later, as they rode out of town, McCarty turned to the Kid.

"The hostler tells me yuh worked for John Chisum down in the Pecos country, son," he said casually.

The Kid nodded, avoiding the cowman's penetrating gaze.

"John Chisum's a friend of mine of long standin', Kid, the cowman said. "How's he doin' these days?"

"Fine," lied the Kid.

The Kid's heart pounded. To him the name John Chisum was only a name. Chisum, owner of the Turkey Track outfit, was well-known in the Territory. So far the Kid's bluff had worked, but one wrong answer now and the jig would be up. He knew the sheriff was suspicious of him. So was the crippled hostler. Just how much of that suspicion McCarty shared the Kid had no way of knowing.

They rode three abreast through the blinding snowstorm. McCarty and the cowboy remained silent. Neither of them mentioned the killing of Cherokee Bill and four of his bunch last night.

Neither of them seemed to want to question the Kid further. And that silence worried the Kid.

As they neared the foot-hills the Kid recalled the girl he had met that morning. Thoughts of her added nothing to his peace of mind. He could lay no plans. Escape dominated him above all else, to put Palo Duro Canyon and the law miles behind him. But to do that he would have to play the dangerous and desperate game which he had set for himself.

SNOW lay deep in the draws as they neared the ranch, and more was falling. They topped a hill, dipped down a wagon road into the valley. Through the curtain of snow the Kid saw the sod-roofed ranch buildings. Outlying corrals were jammed with milling, bawling cattle. Light glim-

mered at the windows of the main house as they galloped into the yard.

McCarty led the way to the bunkhouse. A wrangler took their horses as they swung down. The Kid stared as half a dozen Frying Pan riders roared up. They tramped into the bunkhouse, tired, profane men with holstered six-shooters.

McCarty tramped in behind them, motioning for the Kid to follow. Inside, one of the men faced McCarty, his face etched with exhaustion, his jerky motions those of a man whose nerves are at the breaking point. Tall, wide-shouldered, he was every inch a range man—every inch a man-breaker!

This man, the Kid knew, was Milt Bain, the ramrod.

"We'll soon be ready to move north, Jim," Bain was saying. "How's that for hurryin' things? Ain't a man that ain't ready to drop, but we're gettin' the job done." He broke off, his cool, gray eyes fastened on the Kid as he asked: "Who's the hungry-lookin' button, Jim?"

"Yore kind of men are hard to find, Milt," McCarty said. "But I got a jigger here that apparently ain't afraid to tie into a catamount. In town Monte Siebold whupped him, but he give him a run for his money. Put some beef on him and I believe he'd hold his own with anybody."

Milt Bain frowned. "Look, Jim, it's men we need, not half-baked kids! Ain't there any men to be hired? We need tough hands, Jim! Men tougher'n the scorched rocks down below to see us through. What good is a bald-faced kid like him?"

"Give him a chance, Milt!" McCarty barked.

"Shore, we'll give him a chance," Bain rapped angrily. "We'll wet-nurse him to a fare-thee-well."

The Kid's face was white.

"Cuss yuh, Bain!" he snarled. "I'll take all yuh got and give more. The boss said I could go on the trail drive and I'm goin'! I'll show yuh who is tough!"

With every last ounce of his strength the Kid swung, fast and hard.

His knotted fist caught the man-breaker flush on the jaw, sent him crashing back on a bunk.

A roar went up from the watching Frying Pan crew. Not one of them had ever seen Milt Bain off his feet before, and some of the toughest among them had tried it. The Kid, swaying on unsteady legs, stood over the fallen man.

"Get up!" the Kid snapped. "Get up and I'll show yuh who has to be wet-nursed!"

CHAPTER IV

All for a Girl

UNHURT, but shocked and surprised, Milt Bain stared up in wonderment, rubbing his grizzled jaw. Then a fierce smile touched his lips and something akin to admiration flicked into his eyes.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he said, and got up.

Bain got the Kid by the collar, slapped him with open-handed blows until the Kid's senses reeled. Then the big foreman carried him to one of the bunks and laid him down. He rose, faced McCarty and the Frying Pan crew, grinned sheepishly.

"Sometimes," he admitted, "a feller makes a mistake. Mebbe I just made one, Jim. He was out on his feet when he swung at me. But a button with that much gall can work for me any time!"

McCarty's rugged features relaxed.

"We see eye to eye, Milt. He's spooky an' quick to flare as an untamed bronc. But if he ain't got the makin's of a man, then I'm a liar!"

The Kid laid still as McCarty left the bunkhouse, conscious of the men stirring about him. Sullen and defiant, he roused later to eat with them in the cook shack. When the others started back toward the bunkhouse, Milt Bain called the Kid to one side.

"We got a big job to do, Kid," he said. "Gettin' the herd to Dodge is Jim McCarty's only salvation. Yuh'll soon learn, too, that they don't make 'em better than that big gent. We're goin' to have to work together, Kid. Would yuh mind shakin' hands? S'pose we start over?"

"Shore," said the Kid, and grasped the ramrod's hand.

But his heart was not in it. He went to his bunk and turned in. In a matter of seconds he was asleep. Cherokee Bill's whelp, full-fed for once, was making up for lost time.

Stiff and sore, the Kid racked out at dawn with the others. After a hot breakfast, he topped his sorrel and followed the men across the valley. Dawn gave way to a clear, cold day, with six inches of snow covering the lowlands like a blanket.

At the roundup camp the Kid was assigned

to the branding iron. It was hard, back-breaking work, requiring skill and quick thinking. But the Kid dived in. Bawling, fractious longhorns were dragged up to the fire. They kicked like mules, squealed and fought, and the tips of their horns were needle-sharp. One slight mishap and a man would be gored to death.

Once the Kid glanced up, saw Bain watching him.

"How yuh doin', Kid?" the tall ramrod asked, grinning.

"Don't fret about me, Bain," the Kid snapped.

They barely paused to eat that noon. Storm clouds blotted out the sun as the grueling day wore on. Bundled cowboys, half-frozen and grumbling, combed the hills for strays, working in pairs. In brushy coverts lush grass peeped through the snow, and in such spots most of the strays were found.

Milt Bain wore out three horses, doing the work of two men. Much of the time Jim McCarty was with him, bawling at the men to hurry, but doing more than his share of the dangerous work. Like his ramrod, McCarty was a man-breaker. He drove himself and drove his men. He rode in and out of the milling herd, cutting out salable beef, scornful of danger. Not once did he ask a man to do what he wouldn't do himself.

The men, their tempers threadbare, cursed McCarty and Bain to their backs. They threatened to quit, but none of them did. And the Kid stuck to his task until every quivering muscle in his body screamed in agony. Hands blistered, sick and reeling from fatigue, he rode in that night and flopped, too tired to eat.

"Yuh'll make a hand yet," Bain told him.

The Kid checked a snarling retort. He dozed a while, but gnawing hunger woke him. The other men were in their bunks, snoring. The Kid pulled on his pants and boots, stole out of the dark bunkhouse to the cook shack.

The cook was washing the pots and pans when the Kid entered. Grumbling, he fixed the Kid a plate of food and hot coffee. Then he headed for the bunkhouse, warning the Kid to clean up his mess.

The Kid wolfed his food, gulped the steaming coffee. He was finished, ready to leave when the door opened. The girl he had met on the trail stood framed there. Quickly she closed the door, leaned back against it. In the lamplight her cheeks were flushed.

"I was wondering why you didn't eat with the other men," she said hesitantly.

The Kid stared. "Wasn't hungry," he mumbled.

"I'm glad you changed your mind about working for us. Dad told me about you. You'll make a hand, I know."

THE Kid felt his cheeks burn. He got to his feet, fumbled for something to say, fuming at the strange effect this slim-waisted, lovely girl had on him. With a start he recalled that he had been wondering about her all day.

He wanted to be curt and hard, but he couldn't. She wasn't his kind. She was Big Jim McCarty's daughter, heiress to the vast Frying Pan outfit. He was Cherokee Bill Bartlett's whelp, of Indian blood, sought by the law.

"I'll get along all right," he said ungraciously.

She moved nearer to him, her eyes gloomed by the same anxiety the Kid had seen in the eyes of her father. She was beautiful in her checked gingham dress. She only came to the Kid's shoulder, but deep in her was a courage and honesty that stirred the Kid.

A half-smile touched her lips. "Dad's counting on you to—to make good," she said. "I don't even know your name."

"Lee," the Kid said miserably. "Lee—Smith."

"Mine's Nancy."

"It's a nice name," he said softly.

They fell silent, neither able to explain the strange feelings that roweled them. Some magnetic force, stronger than either of their wills, held them. A kindred loneliness was theirs. They were young, and they were alone. Something was happening to them, but they didn't know what.

"I had to see you, Lee," she whispered.

"You welcome all new hands like this?"

She drew back, hurt. "No, Lee. It's just that—that you're different from the other men. I could see that when we first met on the trail." Her words came with a rush. "I want you to stay on here, show Dad and the other men. We need you here, Lee. Help Dad on the drive to Dodge. If we don't hurry and get through Dad is broke, done.

"I know Dad and Milt Bain are called man-breakers. But you've got to be tough to run a ranch these times. And underneath Dad's tough hide is a heart as big as a barn. Don't let his loud talk fool you."

"Nancy!"

The Kid and Nancy whirled. Neither of them had heard the door open. Now Big Jim McCarty stood framed on the threshold, his face stony hard.

"Dad!" Nancy cried weakly.

"Get in the house, Nancy," the old cowman said darkly. "Whatever advice the Kid needs, I'll give to him."

Nancy faced the Kid, her lips trembling as she forced a smile.

"What I said still stands, Lee," she said. "Remember Dad's bark is a lot worse than his bite."

She went out the door past her sire without another word. McCarty glared at the Kid, but his wrath was spent. In a duel of strong wills he was no match for Nancy. He fairly worshiped the ground his outspoken daughter walked on.

"I'd appreciate it, Kid," he said heavily, "if yuh'd leave Nancy out of our bargain."

"Suits me, Mr. McCarty!" the Kid retorted, and walked out.

Next morning the Kid saw nothing of Nancy, or her father. Milt Bain set a terrific pace for the men. Anxiously he kept watching the gathering storm clouds. The men, saddle-galled and weary, held to their chores, muttering boorishly.

"Hurry, boys," Bain told them. "We can finish today. Tomorrow we'll hit the trail. In Dodge we'll put on a swarray that'll make history."

Bain's talk aroused no enthusiasm in the men. The Kid grinned to himself. He had heard enough talk to convince him that these men would quit before they got to Dodge. Human endurance could stand only so much.

It rankled the Kid when he kept thinking of Nancy. Once out of Palo Duro Canyon, free of the law, he would skip. Some time later he could settle his grudge with the man who had framed Cherokee Bill.

The Kid was at the branding fire when Monte Siebold and hawk-faced Tas Cofflin rode up to the ramrod near the main herd. Soon after, Monte Siebold, dudishly garbed in a bearskin coat, rode back over the hills toward town. Tas Cofflin remained behind, working with the other men near the herd.

Later the Frying Pan ramrod rode up to where the Kid was working.

"McCarty's in town, Kid," he said grimly. "Seems like Cofflin changed his mind and decided to make the drive with us. Him and Siebold are thick as fleas—and both dangerous when riled. We wouldn't have him on the place if we wasn't so short-handed. Play yore cards close, Kid."

HE RODE off before the Kid could answer. That afternoon Cofflin rode up to the Kid, curbed his mount cruelly. His pop eyes were more bloodshot than ever, and his hatchet face deep-lined. He was plainly a little tipsy.

"Gettin' all the fight worked out of yuh, Kid?" he chortled.

Hate rekindled in the Kid. "Some day," he said icily, "I'm goin' to take yuh apart to see what makes yuh smell, Cofflin."

The lanky gunman laughed unpleasantly and rode away. The Kid was staring after him when he spotted another familiar figure on a nearby ridge. Shock, then alarm, poured through him. That mounted man was Sheriff Matt Trent, looking directly at the Kid!

The Kid turned to his work, cold all over. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Milt Bain join the lawman. The two men talked for a long time, then the sheriff rode off. The ramrod returned to the herd.

Suspicions tortured the Kid. Intuitively he felt that somehow Sheriff Trent had connected him with Cherokee Bill's bunch. A cold, empty feeling settled in the pit of the Kid's stomach. That night, he told himself, he would steal a six-shooter, and shoot his way out of the canyon if necessary. It was his only chance.

Darkness fell with a foreboding suddenness. Tired and utterly depressed, the Kid whirled into the ranchyard with the other men. Dismal lamplight glowed at the windows of the main house, and two saddled horses stood near the portico.

The Kid was dismounting when the front door burst open. For an instant Nancy stood there in the light, then she spotted the men and came running. Her hysterical cry, choked with sobs, stopped the men dead in their tracks.

"Milt! Milt! Dad's been shot! Get a doctor. I'm afraid he's—dying!"

The tall ramrod caught the stumbling, hysterical girl in his arms. He dashed with her back into the house, some of the other men trailing. The Kid hesitated, then walked with his horse to the shed. He heard one of the men ride frantically toward town for the doctor.

That night, after supper, the Kid saw his chance and hurried across the dark yard toward the house. A burning desire to see Nancy for the last time drew him. At the kitchen door he almost collided with Milt Bain.

"McCarty was bushwhacked on his way from town, Kid," the ramrod said in a low, tight voice. "One of the men found him or he'd had bled to death from a shoulder wound. The Doc's with him, doin' all possible."

"Know who done it?" the Kid asked.

Bain shook his head. "All I know is that we've got to go ahead with the drive. With the help of Providence and some six-shooters we may get through. I haven't told the others that. Didn't want to booger 'em. But yuh might as well know the truth, Kid. Can I count on yuh to stick?"

The Kid felt all his plans falling apart. Beyond the tall foreman he saw Nancy in the kitchen doorway, her white face frozen in a pitiful stare of pleading.

"I'll stick, Bain," he said slowly. "I promise."

"Then take this six-shooter, Kid. If I'm readin' sign right yuh'll need it before we get back."

CHAPTER V

Test of a Man

THE Kid barely slept that night. And all his life he would remember that morning when they pulled out. Nancy stood in the doorway, eyes filled with tears. She was staring at the Kid, waving. And the Kid couldn't account for the choke in his throat.

By noon they were past Palo Pinto town, the bawling, pounding herd strung out for almost a mile. Two men rode point, heavily bundled and armed to the teeth. Six men rode swing on either side, cutting back proddy steers that were as fleet as deer. Cursing, shouting men, their nerves rubbed raw, but welcoming a change from the man-killing toil of the roundup.

Bawling cattle, their cloven hoofs chopping through the snow, were hard to hold. Crash of horn against horn, and squealing gear. Blowing horses, frosty breath stabbing from their flared nostrils. Men whipping the laggards with their coiled lass-ropes. And up and down the line Milt Bain riding, shouting orders, calling encouragement.

The Kid was assigned to ride drag, toughest of all the jobs. Hat pulled low, face muffled against the biting cold, he whipped the stragglers, swerving, cutting in and out of the cattle like an Apache. He was at the remuda for a remount when the ramrod whirped up beside him.

"Good job, Kid. Keep pluggin'!"

It was the first compliment Bain had paid the Kid.

"Like shootin' fish in a barrel, Bain," the Kid scoffed. "When does the goin' get tough?"

Worry freighted the ramrod's puckered eyes. A wracking cough shook him.

"Wait, Kid," he warned.

That night Bain assigned the Kid to first guard, along with two old-timers. The other men, dead-tired and hungry, ate first and turned in. It seemed to the Kid that Bain was going out of his way to pour it on him, goad him, test his courage.

But the Kid was meeting that challenge. For Nancy's sake he would help fight the herd through to Dodge. Then he would ride for freedom.

He reeled in the saddle when he rode into camp at eleven o'clock. At the remuda it took all his strength to off-saddle. At the chuckwagon the grumbling cook roused to serve him beans, biscuits and hot coffee. Alongside the other men, he rolled up in his blanket near the campfire, closed his eyes and passed out.

Dawn came, dreary and gray, with an arctic wind howling out of the north. Shivering cowpunchers crawled out of their blankets to gulp scalding coffee and top snuffy broncs. The herd, far from trail-broke, milled restlessly and was hard to string out. Bain rotated the crew, sending point men to swing, and swing men to drag. But the Kid he left alone.

All day long the Kid pounded leather, shouting himself hoarse. Through a slot in the canyon wall they began climbing, topping the Caprock. That night the high plains country lay before them, a vast, undulating sea of brown grass, barely touched by the snow. The howling wind, sweeping across two thousand miles of open prairie, beat at the cattle and men like a ferocious monster.

Another day came, overcast and even colder. On they went, bucking the blasting wind, barely pausing to eat or rest. They crossed Salt Fork of the Red River next day, with Bain driving them like mad. Men, scourged by the flaying tongue of the ramrod and nerve-wracked by endless torment, snarled as they rode, cursed one another when they rested, and forever cursed the rock-ribbed boss who held them to their task.

The Kid avoided Tas Cofflin as much as possible. The tall, hawk-faced gunman shirked many of his duties. Twice he showed up for night guard reeling drunk and ugly-tempered, and each time Bain ordered him to the wagon. Mutiny, the Kid felt positive, was not far off.

It was torture crossing the swirling, icy

flow of the muddy Canadian. After that the Kid lost track of time and distance. In a nightmare of agony he held to his chores. Dulled by the torture, he stared out of hollow eyes at the other men—bearded, haggard-faced creatures who somehow kept going.

Once in the middle of the night he awoke sobbing. He jerked to his feet, unconscious of the stares of the other men, cursing and crying out against the punishment.

Then Bain was facing him, eyes feverish in his sunken face.

"Take it easy, Kid. I know it's—"

He got no further. One of the men, a greenhorn on the trail, leaped to his feet.

"Leave the Kid alone, Bain!" he screamed hoarsely, like a crazy man. "Cuss yore soul, I can't take any more either! I'm through!"

BAIN whirled and knocked the man flat. Then the tall ramrod stood on wide-braced legs, facing the entire camp.

"Listen to reason, boys," he said quietly. "It's stick together or die. Four more days—with luck—and we'll be in Dodge."

Tas Cofflin peered up from his blanket.

"Nobody's quittin', Bain," he sneered. "Yuh got us all buffaloed."

Bain strode out of the firelight. When he returned he spread his own blanket over the man he had knocked flat. He tucked another one about the Kid. For a moment his face relaxed.

"I'm—goin' to—the wagon," he said queerly. "Sleep—there."

The Kid watched Bain stumble away. In the outer rim of darkness Bain's knees buckled. The Kid came out of his blankets, ran stiffly to where the ramrod lay. Picking up the limp body in his arms, he hurried to the wagon, roused the cook.

In the glow of the Dutch oven fire, Bain revived. Pain etched his haggard face. With both hands he clutched his side, gasping for breath. His eyes, afire with fever, rolled whitely. A bitter, agonized groan escaped him.

"It's—got me, Kid," he gasped. "Me—the toughest, man-breaking—r a m r o d—in the Plains country. Keep 'em—goin'—if yuh can, Kid. Yuh're—one hundred per cent. We figgered—all along—yuh'd make good. For heaven's sake—keep goin'!"

He tried to rise, cursing his own weakness. Then he felt back unconscious. The Kid helped get him inside the covered wagon. He and the cook made a pallet amidst the gear, covering him with horse blankets.

The cook didn't grumble, and the harshness was gone from his voice when he said:

"It's pneumonia, Kid. He had it last winter and I fetched him out of it. I'll do all I can. This mornin' I knew he was takin' down, but he wouldn't give up."

Suddenly the Kid's throat felt tight. "Take care of him. Do all yuh can."

In that instant the Kid knew he had never hated Milt Bain. The ramrod and Jim McCarty had issued a challenge. They had put the Kid through a test of fire and brimstone to see if he was a man or a coyote. A harsh test perhaps, but their only yardstick in measuring a man. They, like the men they hired, were grilled in a code of giving, not taking. Not stealing, hating, like Cherokee Bill and his bunch.

These men knew the true meaning of loyalty. Not for glory, or money, or honor did they ride, suffer and face death. It was their job and they did it. Grumbling, cursing, threatening—yes. But steeped in loyalty and pride in the outfit they worked for and holding to their given word.

All the cockiness, all hate left the Kid. He wanted to be like these men. He wanted to measure up to what the Frontier called a man! He wanted them for friends. He craved for the finer things of life that had been denied him. In that moment the Kid did some of the clearest thinking in his life. And in such thinking does a man find his salvation.

When the Kid returned to the campfire he found the men awake. They watched the Kid, waiting for him to say something. It was Tas Cofflin who broke the hush.

"Playin' sick, huh?" he jeered. "Always did figger that beneath his loud talk Milt Bain was yeller."

"Milt Bain," the Kid said, very softly, "is down with pneumonia, unconscious. We're goin' ahead, come Injuns, high water or blizzards. We're takin' Jim McCarty's trail herd through because it's our job—a job McCarty's payin' us for. In Dodge yuh can do as yuh please. But until we reach there we're stickin'!"

"Preachin', eh?" Cofflin sneered. He glanced at the other men, confident of their backing. "Shut up and turn in, Kid."

"Yuh've been a trouble-maker ever since we left, Cofflin," the Kid went on. "Yuh're yeller from the back of yore head all down yore back bone. Get up an' I'll prove it."

Bloodshot eyes seething with hate, Cofflin lunged up out of his blanket, cursing. He was inches taller than the Kid, lean and hard. But dissipation had taken its toll with him. For years he had used his guns, not his fists.

THE Kid knew he was face to face with a killer. Cocksure of himself, Cofflin drove in, swinging. The Kid stepped back. When Cofflin's guard dropped the Kid shot through a right that rocked the gunman back on his heels. Then the Kid dived in, slashing, pounding, hammering, giving everything he had, driven by some mighty force that he had never had before.

From the very fury of the onslaught Cofflin staggered back. Another crashing blow and his arms dropped, his eyes rolled redly. He was unconscious when he hit the ground, beaten and bloody.

Out of a haze came an old trail-herder's voice.

"Reckon that does it, Kid. Like yuh said, Cofflin's been askin' for it. I've worked and slaved for Big Jim McCarty for eight year. Danged if I'd quit now."

Some emotion, new to the Kid, surged through him when he looked at the ring of men. He knew they would back him to the bitter end. They had accepted him. Too full for words, the Kid returned to the chuckwagon.

The Kid was up most of the night, helping the cook administer medicine to the stricken foreman. Dead on his feet, he dragged himself out at dawn. The whiskery old trail-herder met him at the campfire.

"Cofflin pulled out last night, Kid," he mutered. "Figgered he would. Watch out for him. He'll never forget the beatin' yuh give him. Ride with me at point, if yuh don't mind. From now on we'll kind of look to yuh for orders."

CHAPTER VI

Vengeance Trail

SNOW lay deep on the prairie. Dodge City's Front Street was a churned, half-frozen mire. Saddled horses, bois d' arc wagons, canvased freighters and lumber wagons were part of the roistering, roaring tableau. Buckskin men, gamblers, gunmen and cowboys jammed the board walks, crowded the dingy saloons and gambling joints.

Suddenly a shout ran through the town. Men came piling into the street to view a miracle. For out of the white wastes to the southward moaned a phantom herd of shaggy-coated beasts, urged on by scarecrow men astride skeleton horses.

At point rode the Kid, sided by a grizzled oldster. Back of them came the other men, hollow-eyed and dazed, staring through frosted lids, their cracked lips moving as croaking sounds of joy escaped them. Men who had followed a tight-jawed, blazing-eyed Kid through the worst blizzard in forty years.

Loading pen gates were swung wide, the cattle driven in. Beef buyers were there, lending a hand, ready to bid the herd in. The season had been a lean one, and the price was high.

The Kid's tortured body could stand no more. He had Bain carried from the chuckwagon inside one of the heated, sod-roofed buildings. A doctor was summoned as the ramrod was being tucked into bed. Bain resembled a ghost, but he was conscious.

"Thanks, Kid," he murmured, grinning.

The Kid was too tired to answer. He staggered into an adjoining room where the other men were asleep. Flopping on an empty bunk, he slept the clock around.

Stiff and sore, he attended to a dozen chores the next day. All deals were settled at Bain's bedside, where the foreman sat propped up on pillows. The chuckwagon and remuda were sold, and the cattle brought the peak market price.

"The men," Bain said, "are in town cuttin' a big swathe with their pay. They're entitled to it, Kid. Some may never return to the Frying Pan. But most of 'em will get enough of this in a week. Then they'll come back. In the meantime I'll be up in a few days, headin' back. Goin' with me, Kid?"

The Kid felt the ramrod's eyes boring into him.

"Yes, Milt," he said softly. "I'm goin' back."

He didn't tell Bain why. It was hard for the Kid to understand himself. . . .

A week later they rode away from the shipping pens on the outskirts of Dodge, just the two of them on fresh horses. In their bed-rolls were food and supplies. Beneath Bain's coat was a money-belt—a fortune in cash that would put Big Jim McCarty back on his feet financially.

They avoided the scattered Frontier settlements and far-flung ranches. Bain was strangely silent most of the time. And the Kid, gloomed by a black future, said little.

A black wintry night caught them at the edge of the Caprock. They paused on the canyon rim, staring at the flickering lights

of Palo Pinto. Then they dipped down the trail.

The Kid remembered the night of Cherokee Bill's last ride. It was like this. The same soul-stirring sense of disaster touched the Kid's nerves. A ghostly warning whisper seemed to come out of the night to him. He unbuckled his coat, pulled his six-shooter around within easy grasp.

Then, quite suddenly, the Kid whirled in the saddle. A man's voice, deadly and mocking, sheered out of the night.

"Rein up, Bain, you and the Kid! Reach high and leave yore guns where they are."

Bain's hands lifted. "Siebold!" he croaked in amazement.

Stunned, the Kid kept his hands in the air, watched big Monte Siebold stride out of the blackness toward them. In his arms was a short-barreled rifle, covering both riders. Ten feet away he halted, eyes glowing with deadly intent.

"Siebold!" the Kid rapped. "What the devil?"

"I'll do the talkin', yuh half-baked fool!" the saloonman snarled. "Yuh've drawed cards in this game. Now yuh can take the pay-off. I've been waitin', watchin' for yuh to return. I'll take the trail-herd money now, Bain. In a month's time I'll own the Fryin' Pan outfit and be astraddle the world. All right, Cofflin, come out and finish the job."

The Kid froze. Among the boulders behind him he heard a stir. Then Sheriff Trent's voice came like a voice of doom.

"Drop the rifle, Siebold! Me and a dozen men have got yuh covered. That snake Cofflin is back down the trail, hog-tied and squealin' his head off."

MONTE SIEBOLD stared, his white face a mask of horror. Then he was cursing, triggering the carbine at the Kid and dodging back into the rocks. One bullet burned the Kid's cheek as his six-shooter cleared leather. He felt the six-gun buck, heard other rifles blasting, men shouting.

Bitterly the Kid cursed as he flung himself to the ground. Siebold, crouched in a rocky crevice and still shooting, was hidden from the posse guns. Miraculously the Kid missed death as he plunged through the darkness, his gun flaming. Siebold suddenly screamed in mortal agony, rose out of the shadows and sprawled at the Kid's feet. Monte Siebold was dead.

The Kid stood, shaken and pale. There was a lot of talk as the sheriff and his posse crowded around him. The Kid turned to the hard-bitten old lawman.

"Cherokee Bill Bartlett—" he began.

"Ain't got time to talk now, Kid," the lawman said gruffly.

The Kid glared, but held his tongue.

The sheriff ordered his men into town with Siebold's body. Farther down the trail they could join the two men holding Tas Cofflin.

"I'll ride to the ranch with Bain and the Kid," the sheriff concluded.

It was puzzling to the Kid. When the men were gone he turned to the lawman.

"Now yuh got time to listen?" he snapped.

Sheriff Trent's eyes glowed warmly.

"A feller once said," he began queerly, "that confession is good for the soul. It takes a man with nerve to do what yuh've done, Kid. Jim McCarty was right when he said yuh'd make a man if given half a chance. That first day in I had a hunch yuh was one of Bartlett's bunch. I told McCarty, but Jim McCarty cares not a hoot what a man has been—it's what he is. And Jim knows hosses and men.

"Wait, Kid. Cherokee Bill Bartlett was no more yore father than I am. You're white, son—all white. When yuh was a baby in the Indian Territory yore ma died. Yore real father and Bartlett was neighborin' ranchers. They had a fallin' out. But when yore pa died, Bill Bartlett took yuh to raise. Yore real name is Lee Hollis—not Bartlett.

"Bartlett went sour on the world and hit the outlaw trail, takin' you with him. We captured Doc Castro the first day yuh went to work for McCarty. In the shoot-out he was hard hit. He confessed the whole story, and since then we've proved it's true. Doc Castro knew who yuh was all along, but Bartlett threatened to kill him if he ever told. Beginnin' to savvy, Kid? So far as I'm concerned yuh're a free man."

The Kid could find no reply. He looked at Bain and looked away. Monte Siebold, the sheriff explained, was the man who had met Cherokee Bill, and had sent the bunch to their doom. Years ago Cherokee Bill had known Siebold as an outlaw. In one treacherous coup, Siebold had seen a chance to wipe out the bunch and collect a handsome reward.

Suspicious of Siebold, Sheriff Trent had shadowed him. A week ago Tas Cofflin had sneaked back into town and met Siebold. Together they had framed the holdup tonight, which would have meant ruin for Jim McCarty. Tonight Cofflin confessed that he had bushwhacked McCarty. Siebold had hired the gunman to do all his dirty work.

"That's the story, Kid," the lawman said.

"Siebold is dead and Coffin will hang. Bain tells me yuh're a tophand, tough as they make 'em. McCarty is at the Fryin' Pan rollin' around in a wheel chair and probably cussin' like a mule-skinner because we don't show up. What do yuh say, Kid? Want to go back to him? Or go to work again for John Chisum?"

"I never worked for John Chisum," the Kid admitted.

Sheriff Trent chuckled. "We knew that, Kid. John Chisum has been dead for several years."

SHORTLY after that the Kid, Sheriff Trent and Bain mounted and rode slowly toward the Frying Pan ranch. They and Big Jim McCarty knew the truth. But the Kid knew they would never talk. Sometime he figured he would tell Nancy. He wanted her to know. But tonight his heart was too full.

She was waiting for them when they rode into the ranchyard. She already knew the truth, for Jim McCarty had told her. Men, like horses, McCarty had said, are what you make them. Big Jim McCarty grinned when Nancy kissed the Kid.

"I reckon," he grunted, "there ain't much I can do about it."

Nancy was laughing and crying at the same time.

"No, Dad," she said happily. "There isn't."

Milt Bain looked at the Kid and grinned. "Goin' to like it here, Kid?" he asked softly.

And the Kid, tough as he was, could only nod and look away to hide the tears in his eyes.

Jeff Connor and Big Ike Taggart were old friends—but their little tiff over the ownership of a brockle-faced heifer was enough to set the range ablaze with the flash of roaring guns in

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My pardner commences to pull pieces of cast-iron from under his hard-boiled shirt

HAM ON THE GRIDDLE

By ALFRED L. GARRY

Sheriff Egg's deputy scrambles up a lot of worryment when he plays Cupid while he's on the trail of "Sinful" Deeds, outlaw!

HAM, my deputy, has got a heart like a washtub. But his noggin is plumb packed with mush until it is oozing out of his ears like fat oozing from a pemmican bag in summertime. I often examine Ham's sombrero to see if he's cut holes in the crown for the jackass ears he's shore developing if he don't straighten up and ride right.

The lummox has got us in a peck of worryment. A female woman's the cause of it all. And it ain't got a darned thing to do with rodding the law. At least, that's what I think at this stage.

Me and Ham, nervous as a couple of shedeer in catamount country, are cutting the trail for sign of "Sinful" Deeds, the hootowl. Sinful didn't get that handle because he was sparing with his prayers. He got it because he's the most law-deviling outlaw that ever swiped a trapper's grub cache. More than one lawman hard on his trail has been bullet-creased medium deep across the saddle parts while bent over to read sign. Such a wound

stops pursuit for a tolerable time.

Sinful Deeds is as greedy as a wolverine, trap-wise as a three-toed lobo, quicker to strike than a blind sidewinder, and when cornered, Deeds can be deadlier than a red-eyed weasel.

He wasn't always that way. He grew up in Sweetgrass County and got to be a top-hand. But rough. They soon found he was no feller for gentling broncs. He would flash his gunpowder temper too easy on a cayuse that throwed him.

"Look here, Deeds," Pete Blanchard admonishes after Deeds has used his quirt on a skittish bronc. "I don't allow any of that on my spread! Draw your time. And stay off the Bar B Bar!"

"Meanin' I can't see Miss Kate?" Deeds snaps, still sulfureous at the bronc.

"That's it!" Pete nods. "Pull yore freight!"

"That puts Howie Springer in the saddle, don't it?" Deeds snarls. "Take this!"

With that, Deeds reverses his quirt and savagely saps old man Blanchard. As the rancher falls, Len Anderson, the camp cook, grabs his cleaver, rushes, and makes a swipe at Deeds. Deeds' fist hip-dives. Mouthing curses, he slams two slugs into the old cook's legs. The other three he uses on the water barrels. After hazing away the hosses, he sets fire to the chuckwagon and rides into the hills. A hootowl!

KATE BLANCHARD, just home from Butte high school, gets plumb alarmed when her dad's weary bronc, the saddle twisted under it, plods into the home corral. She spurs her own bronc into the ground, busts into our office, and dry-eyed, gives us the news.

Me and Ham saddle a fresh bronc for her, and back-track old man Blanchard's bronc out to the scene. As we near the smoldering wagon, Howie Springer rises from where he's squatted on his heels beside his ground-tied mount. He's a neighbor, a tophand, and making something out of his two-bit spread.

"I got Len's bleedin' stopped," he says seriously. "But—" He waves toward a tarp-covered mound.

Kate slips off her bronc into his arms. Howie throws a kind, protecting arm about her shoulder. At the soothing touch of his hand, her shoulders commence to quiver. The pent-up tears she's so bravely dammed up let go in a flood.

Howie leads Kate away while me and Ham read sign in the dying light, then catch up a couple of pack-horses. It's a sad procession that files into Sweetgrass.

By midnight, me and Ham, backed by a eager posse, are cutting across the Bear Paw Hills toward the only pass Killer Deeds can take to get out of the country. In the first light of false dawn, Ham leans over in the saddle, his wise bronc cutting from side to side of the trail as Ham searches the ground for signs.

"We're close!" he shouts. "A hard rode bronc is just ahead. Better unscabbard yore—"

A shot reverberates in the canyon. Ham pitches out of the saddle. My heart chokes the breath in my throat. For a second Ham lays still. Then I'm plumb happy my pardner is as big through the middle as he is tall. Because he rolls down hill like a tumbleweed and lodges behind a boulder. The startled posse leap from their saddles, scurrying for shelter.

Another shot blasts. I feel my mount shudder as granite chips from the ricocheting slug spatters. I'm pitched from the saddle. I put out my hands to break the fall. My head crashes into a rock. All goes black. . . .

I come to and open my eyes with a groan. I shake the fuzzy cobwebs out of my skull. The glum-faced posse is squatted around me. I stagger over to where Ham is propped against the canyon wall. He's pale as a fish's underneath side.

"Wh-where did he get yuh, pard?" I ask anxiously.

"Where I can't be hurt, Egg!" Ham replies, and grins weakly.

"In the head!" I jump to a logical conclusion.

Shore enough, Deeds' slug has parted Ham's hair neat as any wild cayuse hunter ever creased a bronc. Ham'll be all right soon. I turn to the posse. Not a man is winged. But things is serious. Deeds has stampeded our mounts. We're afoot on high heels without grub or water!

The nearest ranchhouse is seventy miles away. A darned long pasear in tight, spike-heeled Texas boots!

It's a glum bunch that lines out down the trail. Walking wasn't meant for cowhands. The stifling heat reflects from the black cliffs, and salt sweat pours down from our foreheads, smarting in our eyes. We drink from the glacial brook, but the silted water don't satisfy. At the foot of the hills we make a miserable hungry camp, shivering pitiful as the night gap-wind off the snow fields chills to the bone.

"I could eat a coyote!" Ham grumbles, pricking a huge blister on his heel with the point of his bowie. "Hair and all!"

"Shut up!" Howie Springer mumbles, trying to smile through thick, sunburned lips. "For gosh sakes, Sheriff, don't speak of delicacies at a time like this!"

The copper sun shoves up in the east. We rise stiffly. Ahead the morning heat is shimmering on the bare alkali flats. It's going to be downright torture to slog across the barren prairie on feet that are swollen and on fire in our tight cow boots.

"My empty breadbasket's botherin' me as much as my feet!" Ham grunts. "I'm a hairpin what likes my sourdough hotcakes and coffee in the morning'!"

"Ham, I'd give every head of my she-stock for a bait of yore sourdoughs!" Howie Springer says, and smacks his dust-crusted lips.

"You bet!" Old Jess Wilson agrees. "For a stack of yore sourdoughs with a side of hog meat I'd throw in my whole beef gather!"

"Me too!" a half a dozen other waddies chime in.

"Stop thinkin' of grub!" Ham admonishes, gritting his teeth and setting a faster pace. "Come on. When we get home, I'll cook you fellers up a bait of breakfast. The memory of it will make yore mouths water when yuh get down below."

"That's a promise!" the boys chime, their tired spirits bucking up.

BUT spirit alone and the prospect of a feed can't keep parched men going for long. By noon some of the boys are staggering. Not bad, and grinning bravely through the alkali dust mask. At dusk we come to a miserable stock-fouled water-hole.

"I'll take charge," Ham declared. "None of yuh fellers drink this water until I've fixed it."

Ham collects three neck scarves, and filters the water into his sombrero. In the meantime I'm busy scurrying around for some short spine cactus. I wrap the prickly pieces in the leg of my chaps and wring a few drops of cactus juice into the water Ham's filtered. It clouds the water, then precipitates the remaining alkali, settling it to the bottom.

There's a sip of water apiece. Bitter and strong, it is just enough to take the fever out of our mouths. There's not enough to slake our burning thrist. We lie down beside the water-hole, close together, trying to warm each other through the eternity of the cold prairie night. The next morning the water-hole is dryer than a buffalo bone.

"Forty miles more!" Jess Wilson moans. "Don't know as I can make it."

He commences to cuss Sinful Deeds. The other boys join in.

"Tut, tut!" Ham snaps. "Cussin' Deeds won't make tracks! I'm as near done in as any of yuh. But, by golly, I've promised yuh fellers a feed of hotcakes, and I'm goin' to slog through! Come on! Egg, you set the pace for the first hour."

I rise, get my bearings. My feet are killin' me. I'm stiff as a board. I know the snail's pace I'm setting will take three days to make the remaining forty miles. How long can a man go without food or water in the blazing sun?

We ain't traveled a mile before Jess commences to babble to himself. That's my answer. I'll collect the men's guns tonight. Starving, sun-struck men's tempers get powerful trigger touchy after the third day.

"Say, what's that?" Ham asks and points.

Far out on the prairie a rolling cloud of dust billows. Ham gathers up an armload of mesquite, makes three piles, and touches a match to them. Three plumes of greasy smoke spiral upward, the frontier signal for help.

The dust cloud veers away from us. Our sudden hopes are plumb throwed.

"Only a dust devil!" Howie Springer opines dismally through his thick black lips.

"I give up!" Jess slumps to a boulder, taking his head in his hands. He's just too danged old for this sort of thing.

"Not yet, Jess!" I cry hopefully. "Look!"

The billowing dust cloud has veered again. Toward us! Soon we can hear the thunder of hard running hoofs.

"Hosses!"

"A wild bunch!" Jess shakes his head pessimistic.

"Nope!" Ham's got both hands cupped behind his ears, straining forward, the better to hear. "Nope!" he repeats. "No colts! Some are shod!"

We gather in an anxious, hopeful knot. Over the rise a buckboard swings, followed by a remuda. Pushing on the reins and playing the leather on the lathered horses is Kate Blanchard!

A cheer goes up from the haggard posse. Kate jumps from the buckboard, making straight for Howie Springer.

"Are you all right?" she cries anxiously.

Howie's red-rimmed eyes take on a proud look, and his slumped sweat-stained shoulders square proudly as he folds her in his arms. That boy and gal will do to ride the river with!

"When your riderless mounts stampeded into Sweetgrass, I knew something was wrong," Kate tells us, parceling out water

sparingly from the two kegs she's got in the buckboard.

"Did yuh bring grub?" Ham asks, being mighty partial to victuals.

"The first thing I could lay my hands on." Kate grins.

"Not my—"

"Yep!" Kate laughs musical. "Your griddle, sourdough starter, and all the fixings for flapjacks!"

"God bless yuh, woman!" Old Jess, who's been a woman-hater these sixty years, says fervently.

In less time than it takes to tell, we've got a fire going, fragrant coffee bubbling, and Ham's long cast-iron hotcake griddle heating over the coals. With Kate watching every move, Ham pours his sourdough starter into a bowl, adds flour, bacon grease, and whips up the batter. In no time he's flipping his flapjacks, and Kate is serving them to the starved men."

"Kate, I guess you saved our lives," I tell her as we pack up to leave. "Any time you need a friend, don't hesitate to call on me and Ham. . . ."

THEN hard times, drouth, and screw flies come to our Sweetgrass country. Cattlemen who used to be able to play no limit poker three nights a week, can't even sell enough beef to pay their grub bill at the store. It's about then that folks no longer refer to Deeds as Bill. He's always spoken of as Sinful Deeds.

And sinful he is. A cattleman, pushed right up to the wall will get together a beef gather that might tide him over. Out of the night Sinful Deeds and his crew of outlaws will ride. They'll gun the night herder, and run off the herd. In these hard times, there's plenty of crooked cattle buyers who'll buy a hot herd, no questions asked, and ship 'em out of the country between two suns.

Sinful Deeds don't confine himself to cattle. He's held up more than one poor bent-backed prospector and relieved him of his poke of hard-panned gold. Or a trapper coming out of the hills with his winter's take of pelts is jerked out of his saddle by Deeds' ambush-thrown lariat. Before he comes to, his mount and pack-hoss have disappeared.

Sinful Deeds has cut so many notches in his six-gun that folks commence to look slantwise at Ham and me and nod curt.

Howie Springer drops into our office before breakfast one day and stows away an even dozen of Ham's sourdough hotcakes. It's fun to feed that downright hungry lad. He can't afford a cook, and has worked himself as gaunt as a hard-wintered cow with twin calves. After thanking us, Howie stands in the doorway, scuffing the toe of his boot, hesitating like.

"Out with it!" Ham says, knowing Howie's got something on his mind. He jumps to the wrong conclusion, advising, "Marry Kate. Hard times or no, lad, yuh'll make out!"

"It's not Kate," Howie says, getting sort of red. "It's somethin' you two jaspers ought to know."

"Not that my hotcakes are losin' their toothsomeness!" Ham mocks with a laugh. "Out with it, lad!"

"Folks don't like the way Sinful Deeds is making a monkey out of you," Howie blurts. "We're all goin' broke if yuh don't smoke him out!"

"Vote talk goin' against us?" I ask, seriously.

"Yep, that's it," Howie clips. "Right now the sheriff's salary looks good to a lot of hard-pressed cowmen. Yuh'd better collect Deeds. And—"

"And what?" Ham asks sternly, knowing the lad is holding back something.

"Yuh can count on me," he says simply.

"I want to know exactly why?"

Ham pins down the young waddy's eye, knowing he ain't come clean.

"We-l-l," Howie stammers. "The reason Kate won't marry me is because Deeds has been pesterin' her. Wants her to run off to Oklahoma with him. Says he'll drygulch me if she marries me. Now, in an up and up trigger stackin', I can take the outlaw. But drygulchin' is different."

"But we all know Deeds won't go in for anything clean!" I say. "When yuh ride, Howie, yuh'd better keep swivelin' yore head like an owl's."

"Well," Ham grunts, heaving himself up out of his chair and reaching for his smoke-pole, "it looks as though we got some strictly untasteful lawin' to do!"

We Injun around Kate Blanchard's run-down spread, knowing Deeds will be drawed to her like a fly to honey. Sure enough, we pick up his sign, and commence tracing him down. It's the kind of a job that gives a man goose pimples along his spine every time he rides past a possible ambush.

Me and Ham are as alert as a couple of crows, with six-guns loose in holsters, and safeties off our .30-30's, as we carry them at full cock across our saddle-horns. Deeds ain't going to be easy took, and there ain't going to be time to jack in another cartridge.

Ham scans the rolling prairie before we

top each rise. We follow around the hills, instead of going straight across country. We ain't going to get boxed in a swale, or skylined, if we can help it. Ham crawls to the top of a hill, then motions me to dismount and join him. Below, from a bend in a dry gulch, a wisp of almost invisible gray smoke is visible.

"He's holed up down there!" Ham whispers.

He tilts his snub nose, sniffing and casting like a coon dog searching for a lost scent.

"Cookin' himself a bait of grub," Ham mutters. "Smell the meat broilin'? He'll surprise easy!"

CAREFULLY as a couple of Apache braves angling for a mountain man's scalp, we creep down the hillside. The lay of the land ain't good. Silent as rock lizzards, we work our way around the rim of the dry gulch. We can hear the crackle of the campfire twelve feet below us. Deeds is moving about. But only a danged fool would shove his head over the rim to find out where.

Ham signals for me to stop. Then he slithers a dozen paces along the rim. Drawing both guns, he sign languages his intentions. Guns fogging, we're going to jump over that rim into the bottom of the dry gulch. Deeds might wing one of us, but the other should be able to shoot him sick. It's strong and bitter medicine.

I palm my guns, thumbs holding back the hammers. Ham does likewise, rising to his feet. He nods his head, counting: one, two thr—

I jump. In mid-air, I throw my sights on the figure below, let my thumbs slip. A startled scream pierces the air. I twist my guns, even as the firing pins bite the primers. Dust spurts four jets on each side of the cowering figure as my two shots reverberate with Ham's.

"Yuh—yuh ain't hurt?" Ham cries anxiously, scrambling to his feet and rushing to the prone figure beside the fire.

"Only my feelings." Kate Blanchard says, rising shakily and trying gamely to grin.

"We thought yuh was Sinful Deeds," Ham apologizes.

"Lucky you recognized me soon enough," Kate declares, and then explains the fire. "I ran across one of my steers full of screw flies, tied him down, and was cauterizing the proud flesh with my running iron."

"We understand Deeds has been pesterin' yuh," Ham comes to the point to say. "And yuh won't marry Howie for fear Deeds'll make yuh a sudden widow."

"If Deeds don't get Howie, slow starvation will!" Ham levels. "That boy's not eatin' right since he can't afford a cook. He's doin' three men's work. When he gets home he's too tired to cook. So he just opens a can—if he don't flop in his bunk too all in to eat."

"That's right, Kate," I chime in. "Howie's gaunted as a spring bear. Yuh love the man, don't yuh?"

"Yes," Kate replies, thoughtfully. "But there's something else."

"What?" Ham bristles. "There ain't a finer hairpin in the whole darned cow country than Howie Springer!"

"I know that." Kate's eyes mist up. "But look at me! I'm so broke I can't afford any more duds than these patched levis! Howie ain't seen me in regular girl clothes. I want a proper wedding. A white silk bridal gown, a veil, a regular minister instead of the tobacco-eating justice of the peace, harp music, a three-tiered wedding cake, and all the other trimmings."

"Such as?" Ham says, soft and kindly, like he speaks to a spooked bronc. "Me and Egg's sort of yore Dutch uncles. Tell us everything."

"I'd want you to give me away," Kate goes on dreamily. "And you, Egg, to be the best man."

"Dressed in store clothes, hard-boiled collar and shirt and all," Ham interrupts.

"Yes," Kate nodds. "The men should come clean-shaven, peaceful, and without their guns—like to a church."

"That's a promise!" Ham rises to his feet. "Kate, yuh remember when Deeds first started to tromp the outlaw trail, yuh brought water and sourdough fixing to the desert stranded posse?"

Kate nods.

"Well, grateful men promised yuh anything yuh wanted," Ham reminds her. "By the twisted tail of the great catamount, them hairpins are now goin' to give yuh a bang-up weddin'!"

"I'd be eternally indebted to you for something else," Kate says, accepting Ham's offer. "Howie's all the time talking about your good flapjacks. He says when we're married, the groom's present to me is going to be a cast-iron griddle like yours! Would you give me some of your sourdough starter?"

"I'll bring it to the weddin'!" Ham promises.

When we get back to Sweetwater, Ham wheedles:

"Egg, I want a two-dollar borrow against my wages. I got to send for somethin'."

He chews up a pencil writing the letter, and then clumps off to the post-office. He comes back on the double, waving a letter.

"Egg! Egg!" he cries excited. "Our luck has took hold!"

I grab the letter. The writing reads:

Sheriffs—Pickings are so slim in your gaunt county that I'm heading for Wyoming. Save your oats.

It is signed by Sinful Deeds!

WELL, that means we ain't got much lawing to do, and can concentrate on Kate's wedding. What Ham sent the money for was a book by Emily Picket on how to throw a fancy wedding. Ham commences to worry-scratch his scalp with one finger before he's read ten pages. Soon he's giving his remaining thatch a frantic currying with both hands. The corners of his mouth droop lower and lower, like a wet moon in the last quarter.

"Egg," he moans, "We've bit off more than we can chew. Weddin's are frightful expensive. A feller can spend all of a hundred bucks on one!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Ham sadly shakes his head. "Accordin' to this dope book, yuh got to have copper-engraved weddin' invites. They're awful dear. We're stumped before we're started!"

Ham rises, pacing the floor, his hands clasped behind his back, his shoulders humped, and his low brow gulched like the badlands.

"By gosh, I got it!" He smacks his fist into his paw. "Give me them old reward posters."

Ham thumbs through the posters until he comes to one for "Ace" Rodal. Ace is now dealing faro at Freddie's. As long as he runs a square game, me and Ham don't let him know we're hep to the fact he's wanted by Uncle Sam.

"See, Egg," Ham gloats. "A counterfeiter will come in mighty handy right now!"

"Ham!" I'm shocked. "You don't mean you're going to have Ace make us some phony money so's we can put on Kate's weddin'!"

"String along with me!" Ham calls over his shoulder, setting off for Freddie's deadfall at a high lope. "Come on!"

Ham taps Ace on the shoulder, and jerks his head toward an empty table. Like most men with an uneasy past, Ace is nervous.

"Slack off," Ham says, ordering a round of drinks. "This visit ain't got anythin' to do with lawin'!"

"No?" Ace is wary.

"No," Ham goes on. "We know yore record as a counterfeiter. And we need yore help."

"Nothin' doin'!" Ace clips. "I'm goin' straight."

"Walk yore hosses," Ham soothes. "All we want is for yuh to engrave the copper plate weddin' invites for Kate."

"Say, I'll be glad to!" Ace agrees enthusiastic.

"I knowed yuh would," Ham says, and then instructs, "Down in the right-hand corner put formal-like, 'Gents to be shaved and slick-hipped.'"

It's so on right down the line. When folks know me and Ham are setting out to marry off Kate, they come forward. Cash money's scarce as hen's teeth in Sweetgrass County. But our folks have a lot of gumption.

A nester family that Kate's father once favored comes up with a beautiful heirloom silk wedding gown. Zeb Bonds, the old prospector, shakes out of his slim poke enough Montaner gold to melt down and cast the wedding ring. A feller over in Buckstrap County writes that he plays the harp, and says he'll show up at the wedding with a shore-enough preacher in tow.

Hop Sung Lee, the Chinee laundry man, who used to be Blanchard's cook in the palmy days, volunteers to make the wedding cake and bring it to the wedding.

Ten days before the wedding, we got things ticking like a new oiled clock. We get one little surprise. It's a reward poster from Wyoming. Sinful Deeds is up to his old tricks. They want him a thousand dollars worth.

"That's Wyomin's worry!" Ham shrugs it off. "Give me the loan of another ten!"

Well, that last ten's the touch that busts the old sock. But I don't care. We're shore set to give Kate a bang-up wedding. But folks, I should have questioned Ham about that last ten. Because the afternoon of the wedding, after we'd taken an oil over bath in the creek and shaved to the quick, I get ready to pull on my new-washed levis.

"Hold it!" Ham says, grinning sheepish. "Yuh wouldn't be so uncouth as to be a improperly dressed best man!"

"Now what?" I want to know, smelling a sudden rat.

"We're givin' Kate a formal weddin'," he explains. "I've rented us swaller-tailed soup and fish suits!"

I buck like a bay steer until Ham shows me in black and white in the eddy-cut book

that the giver away and the best man has got to dress formal or the weddin' ain't apt to take. I put on the monkey suit, and wrastle myself into the hard-boiled shirt. The collar darned near chokes me, and Ham don't have no mercy when he reefs up on the tie.

"Hay, Ham," I say, "ain't you wearin' pilgrim shoes like me?"

"Nope!" Ham clips, tucking his pants into the top of his Texas boots.

IT'S NO use to argue with the stubborn cuss. Besides, I'm darned if I'll wear the undertaker's stovepipe hat that come with the duds. My old sombrero's plenty good enough.

As we go out the door, I commence to belt on my guns.

" None of that!" Ham admonishes. "Remember, I sent out notice for all the hairpins to come slick-hipped!"

"I feel plumb naked!" I crab.

We're mounting up on our broncs when Ham suddenly yelps:

"Gosh-a-mighty, almost forgot."

He runs back to the kitchen and soon reappears with a fruit jar of his sourdough hotcake starter.

"Yuh know," Ham says, and grins, "Howie's givin' Kate a big cast-iron griddle like mine for a weddin' present. He joshes that the only reason he's marryin' Kate is to have someone who'll make him flapjacks like mine."

When we get out to the B Bar B, Kate is radiantly beautiful in that old-fashioned white silk and lace wedding gown. People soon start coming. Two fellers ride up. From their hip-shot broncs, we know they must be the harp player and preacher from Buckstrap. The preacher ain't no fire and brimstone traveling sky pilot. He's a right smart jolly young feller out here for his health.

"Where's yore harp?" Ham asks the other hairpin.

"Right here." The feller reaches into his hip pocket.

Ham groans. For the jasper produces a foot-long mouth harp.

"We wanted a shore-enough angel harp!" Ham explains.

"A harp's a harp!" the Buckstrapper says, dusting it off with his elbow. "I play her mighty sweet."

Howie Springer, uncomfortable as a bear in a box trap in his store suit, sidles up to Ham.

"Did yuh bring the hotcake starter?" he asks.

"You bet!" Ham chuckles.

"Good!" Howie's face splits in a wide grin. "I plumb aim to start off married life on sourdoughs like yore's!"

"Well—"

Ham cuts off his words, and shakes his head, worried-like. Because down the road comes Hop Sung Lee. He's carrying the wedding cake in front of him on his old flea-bitten piebald. His felt-slippered heels are beating a tattoo on the nag's ribs as he tries to make time.

As the Chinee yanks his horse into the corral, a tumbleweed blows across in front. The piebald shies, shooting its spine. Hop Sung Lee swan-dives. He lands spread eagle on top of the flimsy cardboard cake box. The wedding cake is smashed to smithereens in the dust of the corral.

"No use crying over spilled cake!" Kate laughs bravely. "We'll still eat wedding cake!"

"How?" a dozen anxious bachelor voices want to know.

"Ham's brought me some sourdough starter, and Howie's given me a new cast-iron griddle," Kate explains. "We'll have Ham serve hotcakes instead of wedding cake!"

"Fine! Fine!" Hearty shouts of approval go up.

"Say, Kate," Ham whispers, drawing her to one side, "I can't bake no hotcakes on that new griddle of yores!"

"Why not?"

"A new cast-iron griddle has to be seasoned and broke in easy and gentle like a Sunday bronc," Ham explains. "Yuh got to keep it in a hot oven for a week, and rub it down with salt pork every day. Otherwise the flapjacks will stick like a mustard plaster."

"What can we do?" Kate asks, plumb anxious. "I can't disappoint these people or Howie. His feelings will be hurt if I don't use his new griddle in the morning."

"I'll send in for my griddle." Ham solves the problem. "We'll switch. I'll smuggle the one he gave yuh home. When I get it seasoned, we can trade off again. Howie'll never be the wiser!"

We swear Lem Collins to secrecy. With the first strains of the mouth harp wedding march, Lem sneaks his bronc out of the corral and races back to Sweetgrass for the griddle.

The young preacher says the wedding vows beautiful. The two youngsters repeat them after him, their eyes plumb bright with love. There ain't much other sound, except here and there a sniffle from some ranch

woman. And I got to admit, I take a long pull at my nose myself.

AFTER the ceremony, we dance for a while to the music of that feller's mouth harp. But it's plain to see the men, especially the bachelors, are getting grub restless.

"Say, Ham," old Zeb hints, his tongue licking his lips, "ain't it about time yuh try out that new griddle?"

"Shore is!" "Lonely Joe," the sheepherder, says. "Would get married up to a female myself if she could bake griddle cakes like yores, Ham!"

"Here," Howie laughs, handing Ham the new wedding present griddle. "Take this and get busy!"

"I'll get it tolerable black, Howie," Ham says, tipping Kate a wink.

I breathe a sigh of relief. For Lem, with Ham's griddle, lashes his bronc into the corral, and sneaks up to the back door.

Well, sir, the wedding feast, what with Ham's sourdough hotcakes instead of wedding cake is a huge success. Everyone et until their sides were sticking out like a green alfalfaed heifer.

It gets pretty late. Ham's busy helping the guest find their wraps so's we can leave the young couple alone. We're all saying good-by in the parlor when there's the quick clump of reckless boots on the front porch. The door is burst open violent. Framed in the entrance is Sinful Deeds.

He's haggard and dust-powdered. His eyes are red-rimmed. A cheek muscle is twitching nervous. There's a savage cornered rat tightness to his thin, cruel lips.

His guns, the ears laid back, saw the air suspicious. Then he sees that every man is slick-hipped. An animal cunning leer shapes his savage dark face.

"A Wyomin' posse ain't far behind!" he snarls. "I'm not bein' took. I want a fresh hoss. And Kate as a hostage!"

"Not Kate!" Howie's hands instinctively dive to where his holsters should be!

"No!"

Kate fearlessly throws herself between the desperate outlaw and her husband. Deeds jerks off his sights. The ceiling splinters as his gun bellows in the tense room.

"Get them hands up!" Sinful Deeds barks. "All of yuh reach! Tell that posse to stay here if yuh want to see Kate alive again. Come on, Kate!" He throws his gun on the white-faced bride. "Come!"

"Deeds, in the name of the law, yuh're under arrest!"

It's Ham! Slick-hipped, he's walking steadily toward the jittery outlaw. Ham's hand is stretched out. Confidently, as though he expects Deeds to surrender his gun butt first.

"Like sin!"

Deeds blasts. The first shudders Ham back on his heels. The second folds him stiffly in the middle. The third drops him writhing to the floor. Ham! Ham's been killed before my eyes! I see red. "Deeds, yuh lobo!" I scream, clawing toward him.

The outlaw swivels his gun. His thumb commences to slip the hammer. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ham's fist dart like a hawk to his boot. He jerks out a six-gun. The two shots thunder as one. I feel death fan my face as the gun in Deeds' hand shatters.

There's a second shot. Deeds' other gun drops from his crazily bent wrist. Ham springs from the floor, bends his six about the noggin of the numb-handed outlaw. In no time we've got him hog-tied, and everybody's breathing easier.

"I—I said for everyone to come slick-hipped," Ham pants weakly. "Didn't say nothin' about hiding out a weapon in a boot!"

"Ham—Ham, how badly are you shot?" Kate cries, rushing to his side. "Get a doctor!"

"Nope," Ham chuckles. "We'll need a blacksmith!"

"Blacksmith?" half a dozen of us want to know, thinking Ham's plumb daft.

"Shore." Ham grins sheepish. "We'd better confess, Kate."

My pardner reaches up under his powder-burned hard-boiled shirt. He tugs at something, and commences to pull out pieces of shattered cast-iron.

"Howie," Ham says apologetically, "Deeds' slugs shore ruined the griddle yuh gave Kate for a weddin' present. I was sneakin' it home under my shirt to season it proper for Kate."

"But—but does it mean I won't get my hotcakes in the mornin'?" Howie asks, right anxious.

"Nope!" Ham chuckles. "I've left yuh my griddle." Then a grin of sudden inspiration comes over Ham's face as he goes on. "You two youngsters are goin' to have somethin' mighty sweet to put on them weddin' breakfast hotcakes!"

"What?" Kate wants to know.

"The thousand-dollar reward they got out for Deeds!" Ham grins. "I'm givin' it to yuh for a weddin' present!"

Matt Arnold turned and walked away from the bank

LEAD DEPUTIES

By LEW MARTIN

When trouble breaks out in Coyoteville, Sheriff Arnold goes into rapid-fire action, aided by his trusty Colts!

IT WAS quiet in Coyoteville. The sluggishness brought on by the heat of the summer day hung over the dusty little cowtown. Down on the south side of the street Sheriff Matt Arnold leaned languidly against the casing of the open door of his office in the jail.

"Strangers in town," Arnold said without turning his head. "Two men just rode in."

The lawman frowned and lapsed into silence as he realized he had been talking to himself. His deputy, Jim Grover, was no longer sitting back there in the office listening, as he had been so often in the old days. Arnold kept forgetting that Jim was dead now—it just seemed to hard to believe. But it was true.

Arnold tried to turn his attention to some-

thing else as a man will when memories are bothering him. He kept watching the two men he had seen riding into town. Funny, the way he could spot strangers, even from a distance. When you had been a lawman for ten years you got to noticing lots of things that wouldn't mean anything to most folks.

The sheriff always figured that you could usually identify horses just as easily as you could the men who rode them, and he knew most of the regular stock in Mesquite County. Of course the ranchers were getting new horses whenever they needed them, but Arnold was certain the roan and the sorrel that had just stopped at the hitchrail in front of the saloon didn't belong in this part of the country.

"Good hosses," the sheriff muttered. "But kind of dragged out—like they been ridden too far and too hard for this kind of weather."

Arnold watched the two men swing out of their saddles, and he noticed that they just tossed their reins over the cross-bar of the hitch-rail, and made no attempt to knot them to the pole. The two men did not touch their saddle cinches either.

"Couple of hasty gents," Arnold said.

"Talkin' to yoreself, Matt?" demanded Ward Brockton, the town banker as he came along the street and paused in front of the sheriff's office. "Or givin' orders to them new deputies of yores?"

"Mebbe both," the sheriff said.

He turned his attention now to studying the banker. Brockton was tall and thin, and wore dark store clothes most of the time. There was something about him that always reminded the sheriff of a black crow, but Arnold had always figured you could make friends with a crow if you tried hard enough.

"You still insist upon working alone, now that Jim Grover is gone, don't you, Sheriff?" Brockton asked quietly. "I remember the day you told us those two guns you are wearin' were the only deputies you were goin' to have from then on."

"That's right." Arnold's hands touched the butts of the two Colts in his holsters. "Yuh see, Ward, yuh can't kill a six-gun as easy as yuh can a man."

THE sunlight gleamed down on him as he leaned against the side of the door—a big, square-faced man dressed in range clothes with his sheriff's star pinned on the flannel shirt that covered his powerful chest. Matt Arnold was edging close to fifty, but he looked younger, and there were few who weren't willing to admit he was a good lawman.

"Never did find any trace of those men who killed your deputy, did you, Matt?" Brockton asked casually.

"Not yet," said Arnold grimly. "But I'll find 'em someday."

"Hope so," said the banker.

He strolled on down the street toward the Coyoteville Bank that was next to the saloon.

Arnold walked back into the office and sat down at his battered desk. He kept remembering that morning just a month ago. He had sent Jim Grover out to the Bar L to see old Seth Lee. Lee was always getting excited about nothing, always claiming that some of his stock was missing and demanding the Law do something about it right away. Usually the strays turned up somewhere in the brush, but the sheriff had figured the old man might be right sometime so he or Grover usually rode out to the ranch to investigate each complaint.

That day the morning had passed, then noon, and it had been getting close to sunset and the deputy had not returned. So Arnold had headed for the Bar L to see what was wrong. But before he reached there, back in some boulders at the edge of the road, he had found Jim Grover dying from two bullet wounds in his back.

"Three men, Matt," Grover had managed to whisper. "Never seen 'em before. Rode by me on the road—shot me in the back. Don't know why. Might be—"

Grover had never finished that last sentence, for he had shuddered and died with the words on his lips still unspoken.

"Might be—" Arnold repeated now, as he often had done when he thought about those last words. "Might be what? I shore wish I knew what Jim was tryin' to tell me."

The sheriff came out of his reverie and glanced up as he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs. A rider was coming along the street, his horse galloping fast. Arnold quickly got up from the desk and moved to the door. He stood there watching as the rider halted his mount in front of the office.

"Trouble, Sheriff!" shouted the man in the saddle. "The northbound Overland stage has been held up about five miles south of here and the driver and guard killed!"

"Who are you?" demanded the sheriff, for the rider was a stranger. "And how come yuh know about the holdup?"

"Name is Tom Young," said the rider breathlessly. He was a lean, dark man in worn range clothes. "I was headin' this

way hopin' to get a ridin' job on one of the spreads around here. Rode up on top of a mesa and could see the stage road down below." He swung out of saddle and dropped the reins of his horse close to the hitchrail in front of the office. "So I watched the stage comin' along."

"All six hosses movin' fast, as usual?" the sheriff asked the man who said he was Tom Young. "And old Lem Harper's beard streamin' in the wind."

"They were, all six of 'em," Young said. "And the stage driver's beard shore was streamin'. I seen the stage getting closer to a bunch of big rocks down below, then I saw four men with masks hidin' back in them rocks. I was too far off for six-gun shootin' and I ain't got a rifle."

"Nothin' much yuh could do in a case like that," Arnold told him. "Then what happened?"

"Like I told yuh, them bandits killed the driver and guard. I saw them two tumble off the top of the coach and just sprawl there in the road. So I headed for town to tell the Law what happened—and here I am."

"All right," said Sheriff Arnold. "Shore glad yuh told me about it, Young. I'll ride out and investigate soon as I can saddle up." The lawman smiled. "Reckon yuh must be thirsty after a ride like that on a hot day. Why don't yuh drop down to the saloon and get yuh a drink?"

"I'll do just that." Young grinned, picked up his horse's reins and then swung into the saddle to ride down to the saloon half a block away. "See yuh later, Sheriff."

"Shore will," said Arnold.

The sheriff went back to the stable behind the jail and saddled his favorite horse. He didn't seem to be in any hurry, but Matt Arnold always had been a man who did things slowly but thoroughly.

WHEN he rode out onto the street he found a crowd gathered in front of the office. Men were milling around excitedly. Evidently the man Young had spread the news of the stage holdup in the saloon, and had done it fast.

"Hear about it, Matt?" demanded Ward Brockton. "The northbound stage has been held up and robbed south of town, and the driver and guard killed!"

"I know." Arnold nodded. "That feller Young told me about it first off. I'm ridin' out to investigate now."

"We'll go with yuh!" offered a townsman. "Wait till I get my hoss."

In a few moments seven men were mounted and ready to ride with the sheriff. But Young and the two strangers the lawman had seen earlier were not among the horsemen.

"All right," called the sheriff. "Let's ride!"

He headed out of town, with the other men following him. His square jaw was set and there was a stern expression in his eyes.

When the posse was about a mile outside of town the sheriff's horse started acting up. Arnold appeared to have trouble controlling the pinto, which was unusual, for he had been a bronc rider in his younger days, before he had become a lawman.

"Go on ahead!" he called to the others. I'll foller and catch up with yuh soon as I get this blasted hoss tamed down."

The other men rode on and soon were out of sight around a turn in the road. Arnold's horse quieted down right suddenly when there was no one else around.

"Yuh always did hate spurs, Spot," muttered the sheriff, with a grin. "Just the touch of 'em makes yuh plum wild."

He halted the horse and sat in his saddle for a moment, thinking. His surroundings seemed more than usually familiar, and then he realized that this was the spot along the road where he had found Jim Grover dying.

Suddenly something buzzed by Arnold's left ear that sounded like an angry hornet. Then he heard the crack of a rifle. He kicked his feet out of his stirrups and dropped out of saddle. He landed hard on the dirt and brush at the side of the road, rolled over, then leaped behind a big boulder. The next moment he was kneeling behind the rock, both guns in his hands. His horse had galloped some distance away, then stopped.

For what seemed a long time the sheriff waited patiently. Finally a man appeared at the side on the road. He was on foot and carrying a rifle. Arnold recognized him as one of the two strangers who had ridden into town that morning.

"Reach high!" snapped the sheriff.

The man cursed and threw up the rifle—but Arnold's right hand gun roared before the drygulcher could shoot. The man reeled and pitched forward as Arnold's bullet got him in the chest.

The sheriff stepped out from behind the rock. He dropped one gun back into the holster and his face was hard as he turned the wounded man over on his back. The eyes of a killer glared up at him.

"Yuh got me," groaned the wounded man. "Was a fool to try to drygulch yuh—but it looked so easy I couldn't help it. Just aimed

to make shore—yuh'd had really left town. Figgered one less lawman always was a good thing for us—just like we thought when we downed that deputy a month ago."

"Then it was you who killed Jim Grover?" demanded Arnold, rage sweeping over him as he glared at the man on the ground. "Shot him in the back for no reason except yuh didn't like lawmen?"

"That's right," whispered the wounded man, his words slower, and his voice weaker. "Was a mistake—shouldn't have—"

He shuddered, and grew still.

"There's one of 'em, Jim," the sheriff muttered softly as he stared down at the dead man. "I'll get them others now."

Arnold got his horse and rode back to town. He did not ride in along the single street, but circled around behind the buildings until he reached the stable in the rear of the jail. Here he left his horse, and went back along the buildings on foot.

Just as he reached the rear of the bank he heard a shout, and a shot from inside. With his guns ready the sheriff raced down an alley and around to the front of the bank.

He glanced in through the open door. The other stranger was just coming out, a couple of money-bags in one hand and a gun in the other. Arnold fired as the man reached the door. The bank robber dropped —a bullet in his heart.

TWO men came out of the saloon next door. The sheriff paid no attention to them. He turned, his guns in his hands and peered up and down the street. He saw Tom Young swing into saddle, and start to ride away.

"Come here, Young!" the sheriff shouted. "No use tryin' to get away now. I know yuh're one of the hombres who killed my deputy!"

Young cursed and fired. The bullet tore a hole through the peak of the sheriff's hat—and then Arnold's guns were roaring. Hot lead swept Young out of the saddle, and down into the dust of the road.

"I got 'em, Jim!" Arnold said grimly, as he stood there. "All three of 'em."

"Good work, Sheriff!" cried Brockton, as the banker appeared. "But what brought you back to town just at the right time? Thought you had gone with the posse to investigate the stage holdup."

"There wasn't any stage holdup," said the sheriff. "I knew that hombre, Young, was lyin' about that soon as I got talkin' to him. He was working with the other two strangers and they were tryin' to get me and as many men as possible out of town so's it would be easier to rob the bank."

"What did Young tell you that made you think he was lying?" asked Brockton. "Let's hear it, Sheriff."

"Well, I asked him if all six stage horses were running fast, and he said they were." Arnold smiled. "There's not an Overland in this part of the country that uses more than a four-hoss team. Then I mentioned old Lem Harper's long beard flowing in the breeze and Young saw that too. Which was a good trick, seein' there ain't a driver on the line that wears a beard."

"But you must have suspected the two other men," said Brockton. "By the way, what became of the third stranger?"

"He tried to drygulch me, so I killed him," the sheriff said coolly. "But about those two. I noticed they didn't tie their hosses to the hitchrail when they rode into town, or loosen their saddle cinches like they would if they figgered on stayin' a while."

His last word said, Matt Arnold turned and walked down the street to his office. He suddenly wanted to get away from the crowd in front of the bank. Automatically he reloaded his Colts and thrust them back into the holsters. Those guns had been deputies, all right. Lead deputies.

He stood in the doorway of the sheriff's office, just as he had what now seemed a long time ago—and yet it had only been an hour or so.

"Yuh can always tell about strangers, Jim," he mumbled. "Remember yuh used to agree with me on that—if a man is crooked there's chances it might show in some little way, like not tyin' the reins to a hitchrail."

Funny, but as the sheriff stood there seemed like he heard Jim Grover saying:

"Yuh're right, Matt—and thanks for gettin' 'em for me."

A wind had suddenly risen and it looked like it was clouding up to rain. Of course that whisper Matt Arnold thought he heard might just have been some papers rustling on his desk in the office—but anyway he was feeling a heap more contented than he had been for a month as he stood there. Jim Grover had been a friend, and a mighty good lawman.

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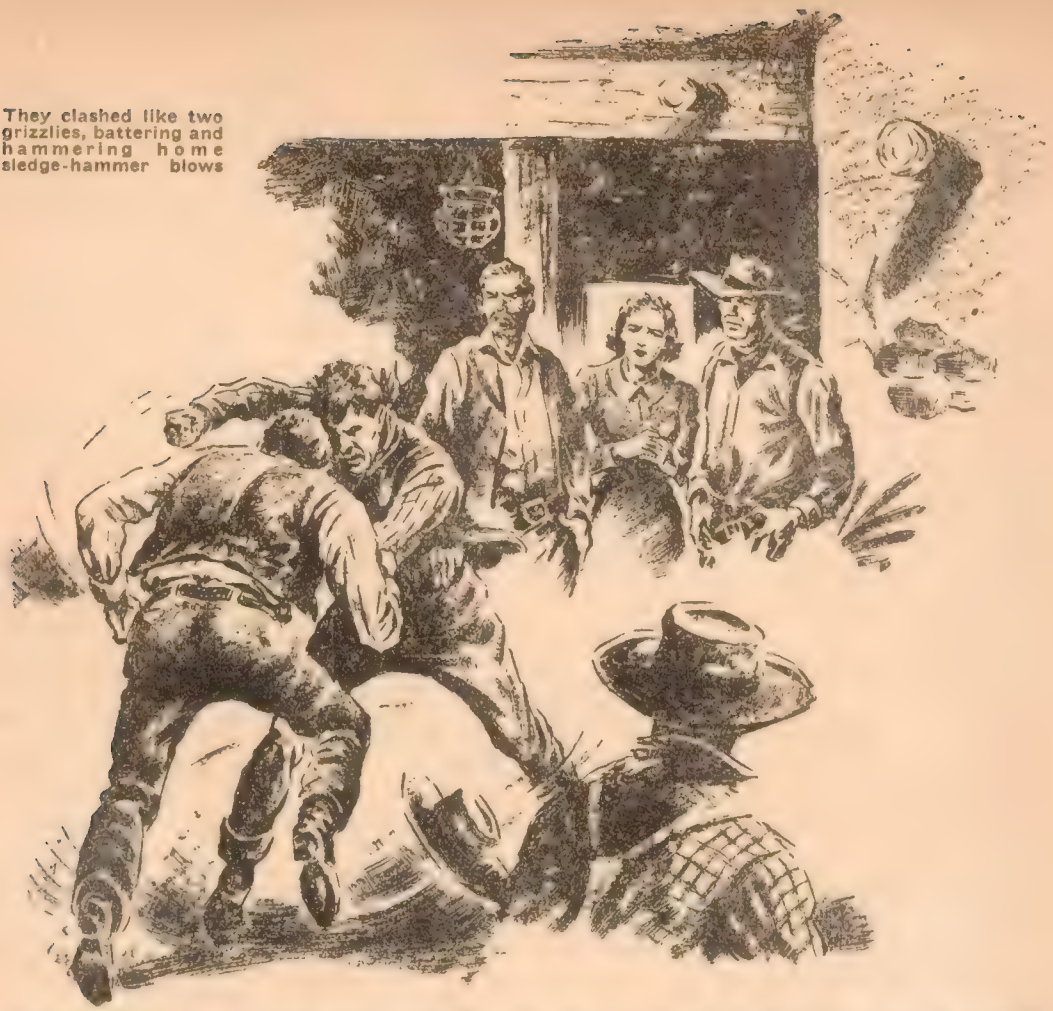
Next Issue: Complete Novelets by LARRY A. HARRIS, TOM GUNN and STEPHEN PAYNE—plus Many Other Exciting Yarns!



They clashed like two grizzlies, battering and hammering home sledge-hammer blows

NEIGHBORS OF POVERTY RANGE

By ROGER RHODES

For long years old Claud Higgins, pioneer cowman and banker, and Sheepman Charley Whorton carry on an angry feud, until—

CLAUD HIGGINS turned his broad back and reached for a gun-belt behind the desk. Every wrinkle in his leathery face was etched with the wisdom and understanding of a man who had judged people and cattle for fifty years, and his snort was that of a man certain of his own judgment.

"You bet I let Bill Boggs have a thousand without no security," he told the dapper young banker from the Mountain State Bank across the street. "I'm a cowman and a banker, and I'd rather have Bill's promise to pay than a mortgage on his run-down cow outfit." He buckled on the gun-belt, glared at Harry Mills, sleek in store clothes.

"You're headed for the penitentiary, Claud," Mills said. "Your old friend, Sam Garland isn't bank examiner any more. You'd better cover up all the friendly loans you've made before Stanley Baxter gets here, or your bank will go busted."

Claud Higgins stood there, a giant old man, his blue eyes under bushy gray brows darting lightning flashes. He had helped defeat Indians, outlaws, and Nature itself in the Oregon country and had been a recognized leader of the community ever since wagon wheels had rolled across the rugged Blue Mountains. Now folks who trusted him were

dependent upon him to overcome this new menace.

"Them danged new bankin' laws ain't fair," he said gruffly. "On account of the drought last summer, there ain't graze enough to feed our cows this winter, and I reckon I've got out about fifty thousand dollars, with not a scrap of paper to show for it. If men don't feed their stock between now and spring, there won't be a steer left on the range next summer. So they're feeding 'em on hay I furnished money for. After roundup next fall, every cowman who owes my bank a dollar will trot right in here and pay up in full."

"You're not as big as the banking law, Claud," Harry Mills said, smiling slightly. "If you haven't the money to cover with, why don't you borrow it from my bank? I've got more money than customers."

The thunder-cloud lifted from Claud Higgins' craggy face. He had been worried about the coming of that bank examiner. Stanley Baxter was young, full of new business ideas, a stickler for laws and rules. Not one of the newer generation seemed to have a bit of savvy about honor and friendship. Even if the whole country suffered, they would get their "pound of flesh!" Old Claud felt as though every honest man in Blue-Lick Valley depended on him for protection against such scheming scoundrels. He slapped the young banker on the back, chuckled. Harry was mighty fine.

"Son, it's heartenin' to meet a youngster like you," he said. "Soon as folks hear how yuh stepped right in and helped us all yuh'll have more bankin' business than yuh can do. I'll be right glad to share the business with a man who puts the needs of friends and neighbors ahead of all them new-fangled bankin' laws."

HARRY MILLS gave the oldster a level look. "Of course, I'll expect your security to be gilt-edged," he said, frowning slightly. "You couldn't expect me to let my bank get into a jackpot like yours is in now."

Claud Higgins lost his smile. "Yuh tellin' me my word ain't security enough for any man!" he exploded, towering over the young banker like a seasoned oak tree over a sapling. "Why, dang yore coyote heart!"

Harry Mills swapped glare for glare with old Claud.

"It's business," he said firmly, "and I'm a banker — not a philanthropist. Helen doesn't want her father to go to the pen. I promised her I'd give you money, provided you dug up proper security. Now it's up to you."

Claud Higgins had kind of hoped that his daughter Helen might persuade Harry Mills to help him, but he might have realized that the young banker, who didn't have a bit of Frontier spirit would make it a cold business proposition.

"If I had gilt-edged security to put up," he said gruffly, "I wouldn't need no loan from yore bank, Harry."

Harry Mills smiled tightly. "Let's get our horses and ride out Blue-Lick Creek way," he suggested. "Every man you've lent money to—if he's a real friend of yours—will gladly give a mortgage on his holdings to save you from the penitentiary. That will square your bank examiner."

"Why, danged yore schemin' polecat soul, Harry!" Claud Higgins thundered. "My bank is founded on trust and confidence. Think I'd tell my friends I was so near ruined that I couldn't take their word any more? Why, good glory man, I'd lose every friend I've got in Oregon!"

Mills shrugged. "Helen and I were afraid you'd feel like that," he said, turning toward the street door. "You've rodded things so long in Blue-Lick Valley that you think you're bigger than the law. You like to do the noble thing, so you can hear people talk about what a great man old Claud Higgins is." He glared at the oldster. "You want to go down as a kind of landmark—like the old Oregon Trail out there! When people come to your bank you haven't got the nerve to say 'No!' because they depend on you and you wouldn't let them down for anything. But for Helen's sake, I'm not going to let them send you to the penitentiary, dang your stubborn old soul." He headed for the street.

A bellow of rage exploded from Claud Higgins. He took three long strides, hands clawing at gun-butts. Why, dang that young upstart's impudence! Then Claud Higgins pulled up in his tracks, grunting, as another surge of anger swept through him, for he knew that what Harry Mills had said was true. He was afraid to say "no" to a friend. But there wasn't much use of starting a ruckus with a man who'd just handed him straight talk, right from the shoulder.

He was turning back into his office, grumbling when he remembered where he had been headed when his visitor arrived. He hesitated about taking that ride now, because it sure hurt a man when the truth hit him right between the horns. He had been on his way to borrow money from the only man in the country who had it to loan, and he'd felt a little sneaky, because Charley Whorton was a sheepman, a big one. But he would let old Claud have all the money he wanted without question. There hadn't been a woollie this side of Piney Ridge in twenty years, and Whorton would grab at an opportunity to have the backing of a man like Claud Higgins—just in case that loan wasn't repaid by the time he tried again to drive his sheep down into Blue-Lick Valley next winter. A man would be kind of hogtied

to a promise, Claud reckoned, but there was no danger of ever having to keep that promise, because the money would be repaid, pronto, as soon as fall roundup was over.

He sank down into his chair, panting, and was sitting there when Helen came in. He looked up into the sunshine of her face and some of the haggardness left his own. She brushed a slender hand through an unruly strand of blond hair, her smile flashing. She wore a divided skirt and brush jacket, and silver spurs clinked on the heels of her hand-tooled riding boots when she dropped onto the arm of her father's chair.

"Dad, you old bear, you look so glum," she chided. "You can't do everything your own way, because the country's growing up and things have changed a lot. Your friends love you, and they'll understand how hard-pressed you are." She snuggled her cheek close to his. "Dad, please do what Harry tells you. Everybody will be glad to help you."

FOR an instant, old Claud Higgins just sat there, fighting the anger that blazed through him like a searing flame. The worst of it was that she was right. Every man in the country would help Claud Higgins as soon as they learned that he had bitten off more than he could chew. But old Claud knew that when a man once showed weakness he lost prestige. It was better for one to go down fighting than to be an object of sympathy.

"Dang yuh, Helen, what's ailin' yuh, honey?" he roared. "Yuh think yore old dad ain't man enough to handle this thing?"

She ran a hand through his wiry gray hair.

"Dad," she said softly, "if you're thinking of telling that bank examiner some outlandish lie it just won't work. I'm not going to see my dad sent to the penitentiary—and neither is Harry!" She stood up, resolution bright in her blue eyes.

Old Claud sputtered, then lumbered to his feet like a prodded grizzly. Once again he felt the full strength of the mighty force that had made him a great man in his community dominate the tired feeling that had come over him lately. He knew exactly what he intended to do and how he would handle this matter. He didn't need the aid of a girl, or an amateur banker. He would cover his friendly loans and have enough money left over to tide the cattlemen over until next fall roundup.

"Now, you looky here!" he thundered, shaking a gnarled forefinger in his daughter's face. "This has gone far enough. One more word out of you, and I'll lay the law down! And if that Harry Mills don't watch out I'll crush his two-bit bank so flat it'll never lift its head again! You stop runnin' around with that young fool till he learns some sense about bankin'!"

He stalked out without another word.

It was bitter cold, but Claud Higgins rode up through the mountains, muffled to the ears in a great sheepskin coat. The snowdrifts piled high against trees and jagged boulders made the ridge a natural barrier against the thousands of sheep down in Warm Springs Valley. Otherwise, he might not have been riding across the ridge in the dead of winter to ask Charley Whorton for a loan.

Whorton couldn't cross the ridge until summer. Then he would want to range his flocks over the lush pastures in the mountains. It would be late fall before Whorton might want to run his woollies into Blue-Lick Valley. But by that time Higgins promised himself he would have that loan repaid in full and with interest.

As he rode down the last slope of the snow-banked trail into the valley below, his nose tilted up disdainfully when the odor of sheep came to him on the sharp, clear air. He saw those thousands of woolly creatures blended against the snowy background, with a tender's camp or a grub-line wagon here and there.

Smoke rose lazily from the chimney of Whorton's great stone house amidst that maze of sheep pens, outhouses and corrals. Sheep blatted in a pen when Higgins rode into the yard, and their odor was so rank it was about all he could stand. Two huge shepherd dogs ran out from under the porch, barking viciously. But old Claud stepped stiffly down from saddle and tied his horse under the bare-limbed cottonwood tree in front of the house.

He stepped onto the porch, kicked on the front door, paused when he heard somebody inside. Then the door opened and Charley Whorton stood there in sock-feet and undershirt, a tally book in one huge hand.

He was a large, deep-chested, red-faced man whose owlish eyes went wide with surprise when he recognized his visitor. Then he grinned and stepped aside for the banker to enter.

"Howdy, Claud," he said. "Come on in and warm a bit."

Claud Higgins stepped inside and his stony glance raked Whorton.

"I reckon I can stand this sheep-trap till I get warm, anyhow, Charley," he said dryly. "It's mighty cold ridin' across the ridge."

"Yuh're plumb welcome, Claud—unless yuh smell up the place worse'n it already is. Hunker against the fireplace and I'll pour some likker."

Higgins stripped off gloves and coat and stood close to the blazing logs until circulation began to sting through him again. Whorton shoved a glass of whisky across the table before which he sat.

"Lap her up," he invited. "Then tell me whether this is peace or war."

"It ain't war," Higgins said, reaching for the glass. "There hasn't been a sheepherder poke his nose across the ridge since them cowmen gave 'em a mess of buckshot-trouble three-four years ago. Remember?" Without batting an eye or changing expression Claud Higgins set his glass down then, and said:

"I come over to borrow fifty thousand dollars from yuh, Charley. I got to have it when I open my bank tomorrow mornin'. Yuh got the money here?"

CLAUD HIGGINS had not so much as speculated on a refusal from Whorton. The sheepman was a hard, two-fisted fighter, who lived by a Frontier code and he wouldn't hold it against Higgins and other hard-fisted cowmen for keeping him and his sheep out of Blue-Lick Valley. They fought fair, too, but had beaten Whorton at every turn.

The big man's owlish eyes blinked, then he nodded.

"Yep, I got fifty thousand to spare, Claud," he said. "But somethin' tells me yuh're mighty hard hit else yuh wouldn't come to me. I ain't exactly yore friend."

"No sentiment is involved in the loan," Higgins snapped. "I've got to get that money from a man who won't blab it all over the country. For a sheepherder, yuh're about the whitest and the closest-mouthed scoundrel unhung. I'll pay big interest, Charley."

Whorton looked thoughtful. "I'll want security, Claud."

"Security! Why, dang yore ornery polecat hide, ain't a man's word good enough? Since when have you got to be like Harry Mills and them other money-lenders!"

The sheepman chuckled. "Shore, yore word's good," he admitted slowly. "But yuh're in a hole, Claud, and I hope yuh stay there. With you busted, my sheep will be in Blue-Lick Valley next year."

The banker snorted. "It's right unfortunate for you I don't aim to go busted," he said.

Then he told his ancient enemy just how hard-pressed he was, knowing that Whorton would gloat. He wanted the sheepman to think that by lending him a huge sum of money he might get his hooks into a slice of graze land in Blue-Lick Valley. After he had told everything, he looked sharply at the sheepman.

"Now, do I get that money?"

Charley Whorton stood up, chuckling. "It shore makes me happy to hear such things, Claud," he admitted. "Yuh'd look right nice in a cage in the state penitentiary, but I reckon my best bet is to bust yuh completely. On account of yuh're the biggest man in the Blue-Lick country, I reckon I'll lend yuh the money, hopin' yuh never see the day yuh can pay me back!"

Old Claud grinned wolfishly. Whorton was reacting just as he had anticipated, hungry to get his hooks in Blue-Lick range.

"Since there ain't no love lost between us, Charley," he asked bluntly, "just what kind of halter noose yuh aim to tie to that loan?"

"Pay it up in full, plus ten per cent interest, by next September," the sheepman said bluntly. "Else I bring my sheep to Blue-Lick for their winter graze, without no trouble from you and them cowmen."

That was what Claud Higgins had anticipated. And he would have to fulfill his promise, unless he repaid the loan when it fell due.

"I come ready to accept that kind of a proposition," he admitted. "So let's have the money. I want to head for home. I can't tolerate this sheep smell much longer!"

One thing about Charley Whorton—he was an old-timer, with a lot of faith in mankind. It was getting harder and harder to find a four-square old-timer who could judge cattle, horses, sheep or men, Higgins figured.

Whorton turned toward the table. "Yuh can stand the smell till I write out a check for yuh, I reckon," he said, grinning broadly.

"Why, ain't yuh got the cash, Charley?" Charley began writing. "Harry Mills will cash it for yuh, Claud. I own a heavy chunk of stock in that bank. Figgered on some day makin' it the only bank in the Blue-Lick country—once I've busted you. Then, I'll be the biggest man in eastern Oregon."

Crimson anger rose up Claud Higgins' neck and spread over his craggy face. He cut loose with a roar that shook the rafters. Now he knew why Harry Mills had wanted him to tie up all that rangeland in Blue-Lick Valley with mortgages. Hoping the cattlemen couldn't pay off the loans, that was it!

"Dang yuh, Charley, I'll bet yuh had somethin' to do with old Sam Garland gettin' retired from that bank examiner's job!" he rumbled. "You knowed old Sam would give me a clean bill on any loan I made. Yuh figgered, with a new, slick-eared bank examiner on the job, I'd soon go busted and my friends with me. Then yore two-bit bank would gobble up all my mortgages and yuh'd foreclose and have range for yore sheep in Blue-Lick!"

A broad grin flicked Charley's jovial face. "Shucks, I didn't do nothin' about gettin' old Sam retired," he said. "Except to have a couple of state senators pull some wires to put a younger, more efficient man on the job."

Old Claud's rocky eyes were blazing.

"Yuh got Harry Mills to court my daughter and take a dirty, underhanded dig at me, to put me out of the bankin' business!" he snorted. "I'd ought to gun yuh, Charley!"

The grin left the sheepman's face. "Now, look here, Claud," he said, "don't go castin'

no reflections at Harry Mills. He's just doin' a good bankin' job the way he figgers it should be done. Why, Harry don't even know I'm his boss. I've kept it secret, votin' my bank stock through proxy." He chuckled. "If yuh got yoreself sacked up in the shuffle, it makes me kind of happy." He calmly signed the check and offered it to Higgins. "This'll be the straw that busted the pack-mule's back, Claud. I'll somehow see to it that yuh won't be able to pay this back next September. Then I'll drive my sheep across the ridge and take over Blue-Lick Valley."

Higgins snatched the check. "I'll bet fifty thousand yuh'll get yore money back, prompt and in full!" he thundered, heading for the door.

Whorton followed him outside, and Higgins turned to fling a last threat.

"I knew yuh'd figger this was the grandest day in yore whole blamed life, Charley, makin' me a loan and gettin' the hooks in me for Blue-Lick Valley. But yuh'd best stick to sheep. Because yuh're shore goin' out of the bankin' business!"

He was chuckling when he climbed into saddle and headed for home. . . .

IT WAS downright pleasing to fight a war with an old hellion like Charley Whorton, old Claud figured next morning when he sat at his desk and thought of the fifty thousand dollars he had just put in the vault. He saw the dapper young bank examiner go into the bank across the street, and he chuckled because he knew that Harry Mills was over there, sweating blood. Mills hadn't expected to have a check for fifty thousand flung in his face the minute his bank opened, but he had paid without batting an eye and hadn't asked a question. Right now, though, old Claud would bet that the young banker's cash reserve was mighty small.

Having the money to cover loans he, Claud Higgins, made to his friends without security knocked the props from under any plan Whorton might have had to gather up mortgages on Blue-Lick rangeland. Of course, Charley was planning to do something that would prevent that fifty-thousand being paid by September so he could bring his sheep across the ridge. But Higgins knew he could repay Whorton on time.

A commotion in the bank lobby drew his attention, then, a group of ranchers headed by Bill Boggs, a cowman from up the valley, came into the private office.

"Howdy, Claud," Boggs said, grinning broadly. "We've come to pay up every dollar we owe yuh. Us boys had a little windfall and figgered we ought to settle up right now, instead of waitin' till fall. Here's the thousand I owe you, Claud." He shelled it out.

Amazed, Higgins sat there protesting, while the rest of his friends dug out greenbacks and paid their obligations in full. They grinned and laughed, winking at one another, but not one of them would tell where all that money had come from. They just slapped him on the back, joshed a little, then went trooping out.

There on the desk was fifty thousand dollars, every cent that he had been short on those loans he had made. Higgins blinked at the money. Somehow he knew that his friends had learned that he was in a tight spot and they had come to his rescue. The banker's old eyes misted slightly and something rose in his throat, choking him. It was mighty pleasing to know that he had so many staunch friends.

But he knew that not a one of those men had had a sudden change in fortune. They were out there on their poverty-stricken cow outfits, doing their best to survive the winter and have cattle left when the spring thaw came. Where had they got hold of all that money?

Then suddenly Claud Higgins knew. He bellowed like a prodded steer, and the thin-faced cashier came running.

Higgins swept a hand over the stacks of currency.

"Put it away!" he roared. "Dang my soul, this here is the undoin' of the whole Blue-Lick country! Them blamed fools couldn't of got so much money in such a big hurry but from one place, and they had to mortgage their spreads to get it. Where's my guns, Bill? I'll gun that Harry Mills, dang his hide!"

He reached for his gun-belt and buckled it on, but when he started to leave the office and head for the bank across the street, he almost collided with his daughter. His eyes blazed.

"Girl," he yelled, "that polecat moneylender that's been courtin' you has gone among my friends and used my name to get hold of mortgages on the best graze land in all the Blue-Lick! Sheep'll come over the ridge as soon as Charley Whorton wants to send 'em, and there won't be a thing an honest man can do to stop em! That cussed Harry Mills has done sold this country down the river. I'm goin' for him!"

Helen grabbed her father by both arms and forced him back into the office. He recognized the fighting fire that blazed in her blue eyes.

"It wasn't Harry!" she protested. "And nobody sold this country down the river, Dad! I made Harry come with me yesterday and I went from ranch to ranch, telling everybody just what a stubborn old fool you were trying to make of yourself. Every one of those men volunteered to give Harry's bank a mortgage and borrow the money from him to repay what you'd lent them without

security. They knew that was the only way to save you from the penitentiary!" She was panting. "Now, blame me—not Harry!"

Higgins sank into his chair, feeling whipped. It hurt to know that his own daughter had taken a hand in forcing an issue that might give Blue-Lick to sheep. He thought of those cowmen who trusted and depended on him. He couldn't sit here and see their rangelands trampled and cut to the grazing roots by thousands of sharp sheep hoofs, and he couldn't let Charley Whorton win that easy. He'd kill Whorton, first!

He stood up, lightning flicking in his eyes, just as Stanley Baxter, the dapper young bank examiner came in, smiling. He shoved out a hand to Higgins, and introduced himself.

"Hope you're not as short on cash reserve as your competitor, Mr. Higgins," he said.

Higgins was gruff in his greeting, for he felt as though the bank examiner was his personal enemy, here to tell him how to run his own business.

It took an hour to audit the books and check on deposits. Then young Baxter beamed on old Claud.

"I must compliment you, sir," he said. "You're the first old-time banker I've met yet who didn't run his business like a brainless fool."

Anger crimsoned Higgins' face, but his daughter avoided an explosion by inviting the bank examiner to dinner, and steering him from the office.

THE minute they were gone, Higgins headed for Wayne Kennedy's general store. There he found a dozen cowmen and settlers loafing around the pot-bellied stove, swapping yarns and gossip. He pulled up a cracker box for himself and sat down, taking in the conversation.

For a time he sat listening to a man tell about Dave Tatum's troubles, and about the oldest boy being down with the croup.

"Shore beats all how trouble's rode Dave like the plague, ever since his wife died," the man said gravely. "I'll bet Dave ain't got enough hay to feed his stock right now, and him too cussed proud to ask for a loan."

Claud cleared his throat. "Tell Dave that I'll lend him money for feed stuff," he said, "whether he's got any security or not. My bank's here to serve!" His glance swept the crowd and he decided here was the place to drop a word or two that would ruin Charley Whorton's plan to take over Blue-Lick Valley. "I don't turn down friend or foe, if it's for the good of the country," he said gruffly, letting his glance settle on Hank Mullins, with whom he'd had some trouble a few months ago. "I reckon even you'll be just as welcome as before, Hank," he said, "if yuh go busted when Harry Mills' bank fails. Come right on over and let yore needs be known." He stood up as though to leave.

Big wall-eyed Hank Mullins, owner of the Walking Y, who had taken all of his business to the other bank, choked.

"What's that about Harry's bank goin' busted?" he asked quickly.

Higgins speared the man with a steady look. "Hank," he asked bluntly, "when a bank runs out of money, what does it pay its depositors with? I'm right shore Harry ain't got money enough on hand to settle accounts with."

He turned toward the door, knowing he had started something. A gust of cold air came in when he stepped outside.

"Boys, Claud Higgins ain't no chatterbox!" he heard Mullins bellow. "When he speaks, it means somethin'! Me, I figger on makin' plumb shore I don't lose my money in no bank crash!"

Later that day Claud Higgins looked across the street and saw the effect his words had had on the community. Harry Mills stood on a chair in front of his bank, trying to convince a crowd of panicky depositors that the bank was sound and solvent. Higgins chuckled.

"Gentlemen!" Harry Mills shouted above the clamour. "Not a depositor will lose a dollar, but payment has been temporarily suspended!"

A rumble like the angry thunder of a stampeding herd rose from that crowd of panicked depositors. Higgins reckoned that Harry Mills was getting a sound lesson in banking, and he was certain that this "run" on his competitor's bank would end Charley Whorton's chances to bring sheep into Blue-Lick Valley. But it might be a good thing if Charley Whorton was on hand to witness the collapse of his hopes.

He stepped out on the sidewalk and sent a messenger on a fast horse to carry Charley Whorton the news.

Later, Harry Mills sent a frantic plea for help over to Higgins, but the old banker gave the messenger a stony look and said:

"Tell Harry he can have a job at my bank—after the crash. But not a dollar of my money goes to help bring sheep to Blue-Lick range."

That was all he could say without letting it be known that Charley Whorton owned a huge block of stock in the other bank. He went home confident that he had won. . . .

Early next morning, before Higgins had finished his second cup of coffee he heard Charley Whorton's bull-like voice rumble from the front yard. Booted feet thumped on the porch, and the banker went to meet his enemy.

He found the big sheepman furious, vicious wrath in his owlish eyes. At sight of Claud Higgins he cut loose a roar that thundered up and down the street, bringing people running

from doorways. His huge hands brushed holsters.

"Step out into the yard, Claud, where there's a-plenty-room," he bellowed. "I don't want to get blood all over yore front porch!"

Helen screamed and ran toward her father. Neighbors came running from all directions, shouting for the oldsters to settle matters peacefully. But Claud Higgins stepped off the porch and strode toward Whorton, chuckling.

"Yuh et breakfast yet, Charley?" he asked gravely.

"Shucks, I et about midnight and then rode like all get-out across the ridge to get me a polecat hide!" Whorton growled. "This range ain't big enough to hold two men as big as us, Claud. I reckon there's only one way to find out which one of us is leaving!"

"I reckon," Higgins said softly, but glaring at the neighbors who had rushed up to intervene. "But I wouldn't want to kill a man I hate like I do you, Charley. I'd want to beat the stuffin' out of him and watch him crawl off like a whipped cur. Shuck them guns and let's go to it!"

Whorton's gun-belt struck the ground and both oldsters sprang in. They clashed like two huge grizzlies, battering and hammering home sledge-hammer blows, any one of which might have dropped an ordinary man. They stood toe-to-toe, slugging it out, with neither willing to give an inch. But each was taking the beating of his life, and knew it.

A HAMLIKE fist exploded in Higgins' face, just as he hooked up a haymaker for Whorton's jaw and connected. Lights of brilliant hues suddenly danced before his eyes. He felt his knees go rubbery, then he was going down. He moaned and fought away the darkness that closed in.

Then he saw two men working over Charley Whorton who lay stretched out beside him. He looked at the man's blood-streaked, battered features, and knew that his own were the same pulpy mess. Those owlish eyes blinked, and Whorton tried to grin with cut and swollen lips.

"Good gosh, Claud," he said, "we went down together!"

They lumbered to their feet just as a wagon crawled past, pulled by two lumbering oxen. People who had been watching the fight, turned their attention to the oxen. Both Higgins and Whorton found an interest in the team.

"First danged bull-team I've seen in this country in ten year!" the sheepman said, glancing sharply at the old banker. "Kind of makes a man think old times are back. But I reckon they're gone forever." He sighed.

"I'll bet there ain't ten men in town, Charley, outside me and you, who could yoke up an ox-team," Higgins said solemnly.

A grin flicked Whorton's battered lips. "There shore ain't!" he declared.

Right then, Claud Higgins did a strange thing. He astounded everybody by linking an arm through Whorton's and walking up the street to Harry Mills bank, where a crowd of angry depositors had formed. He signaled for attention.

"Gents," he said, "if Harry Mills ain't got the money to pay yuh with right now, yuh can step right over to my bank and get yore money, pronto!"

Cheers went up from troubled depositors, for when Claud Higgins said a thing it meant something in Blue-Lick Valley. Nobody walked across the street to get his money, for if Claud Higgins believed in Harry Mills' bank, then it was sound as a dollar.

Whorton glared at his old enemy. "Claud," he said slowly, "yuh just saved me from goin' plumb busted. What'd yuh do that for?"

Higgins chuckled. "I figgered the best way to keep yore sheep out of Blue-Lick Valley was to put yuh in the cattle business, Charley," he said. "Yuh're in it now, with all them mortgages yore bank owns. So I figger we'd better merge our bankin' interests and keep Harry Mills in the saddle. They'd be merged anyhow, soon as Harry marries my daughter."

A broad grin spread over Charley Whorton's battered face. "Did them oxen kind of remind yuh we was gettin' old, Claud?" he asked softly. Higgins nodded, glanced at the oxen, plodding slowly up the street.

"I reckon, Charley. And I thought of somethin' else, when we hit the ground together. I thought how natural it was for us to fight all our lives, then go down together. We're just like them oxen now—ploddin' along. We ought to be friends for old time's sake."

"I reckon we could be right neighborly, Claud," Whorton admitted dryly, "if we kept that ridge between us, and yore polecat smell didn't drift over too strong to stifle my sheep." He gripped Claud Higgins' hand warmly.

Higgins knew that men like Whorton and himself would soon go the way of the plodding oxen. But memory of them would be indelibly stamped on the Oregon Country, as plain as that old Trail over which the pioneers had come.

●

Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts at their best in MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, complete novelet by TOM GUNN next issue!

The three killers were looking for him

RENEGADE RANCHER

By GUNNISON STEELE

Torch Malone, embittered by the loss of his ranch and his cattle, takes a whirl at the owlhoot to see what's on the other side of the fence—and what he finds out is plenty!

CHAPTER I

Get Out, Thief

THE trial was over, and Bill Trevor had been sentenced to twenty years in the pen. Bill Trevor was guilty. He deserved what he got.

He accepted the sentence with a rash grin and a flippant wisecrack.

Freckled, sorrel-topped "Torch" Malone strode along Lodestar's street, afterwards, feeling the town's hostility pressing about him, his own temper sharp and wicked. It was almost as if he himself had been on trial. He and Bill Trevor had been partners in a little cow outfit over in the foothills. To most folks, it was inconceivable that Bill Trevor could have been a thieving rustler without his partner knowing it. Yet that was the way it had been.

Malone held his rawhide-tough body stiffly erect, his smoky gray eyes straight ahead, so that, as he walked along, he didn't see the faces that lined the street. But he was vividly aware of them.

He could feel the eyes upon him, questioning, suspicious. He could hear the tense, furtive whispers.

"Him and Bill Trevor are tarred with the same brush," he heard somebody sneer. "If Trevor is a cattle thief, Torch Malone is too."

Torch Malone wheeled, never missing a step, and stalked up to a burly, hook-nosed man who stood talking to a small group. The man was Dick Sears, foreman for Saul Cleghorn, one of the biggest cattlemen in the state.

"Did you say somethin', Mister?" Malone asked, his temper a white-hot flame.

"Yuh must have heard me," Sears said tauntingly. "I meant to say it loud enough for yuh to hear."

With savage fury Malone hit him. The blow drove him back against a wall. Then, when the burly man recoiled, Malone grabbed him by the shirt collar, whirled him, and kicked him in the rear, smashing him from the porch and onto his face in the dusty street.

Sears rolled over, came up. Bawling his rage, he lunged at Malone.

Torch Malone hit him again, a hundred-sixty pounds of muscle behind the blow. Sears went down again, out cold this time. Malone's eyes lifted in a wordless challenge to the faces of the silent spectators. But nobody moved or spoke.

He wheeled, stalked on along the plank walk.

VENTING his rage on Dick Sears hadn't helped, Malone knew. Sears had only voiced the thoughts that were in the minds of scores of others. Malone remembered the sneering, sardonic smile that had been on Bill Trevor's lips back in the courtroom. He, Torch Malone, had been taken in by Trevor, all right.

Three years before, Bill Trevor and Torch Malone had started the little L Dart outfit in the hills. Malone had worked hard, never suspecting Bill Trevor was just using the L Dart as a blind for his crookedness—or that Trevor was in with a slick rustler gang, systematically draining the basin. Trevor had been spotting the cattle, sometimes even riding with the gang.

Then, one night, Bill Trevor and a couple of others were caught cold. Afterwards, somebody put up a lot of money to bring in a couple of big-shot lawyers from Cheyenne to defend Bill and the others—though who those others were nobody seemed to know exactly. Only then did Torch Malone realize how blind he'd been. He'd been so engrossed in building up the outfit, he hadn't noticed things that were now plain, such as the times Bill Trevor had been away most of the night and had given only some vague excuse.

At first, the shock of discovering Trevor's duplicity had left Malone hurt and bewildered.

Then Malone's bewilderment had changed to a bitter and wicked anger.

Now, Malone heard a quick thud of boots, and turned to see Karen Sands walking along beside him. Karen was dark-eyed, pretty, her slender body vibrant and alive with the fires of youth. She was the daughter of Dave Sands, who owned a little cow outfit a few miles to the west. Torch Malone had never told Karen he loved her, but he was sure she knew it.

Now there was understanding in her dark eyes, in the pressure of her tanned fingers on his arm.

"I heard and saw what happened, and I don't blame you," she said.

He nodded jerkily.

"But it didn't help." He shrugged. "Others are sayin' and thinkin' the same things."

"They're blind, foolish! Oh, how can they think badly of you when you've sold all your cattle, given all your money, to help pay for the cattle Bill Trevor stole? In time they must see how wrong they are!"

"Do yuh think I'd walk five steps to change their opinion of me?" he asked bitterly. "Look at the piety and smug satisfaction on their faces! Karen, yuh're goin' to feel the lash of their lyin' tongues for walkin' along the street with me like this."

"And do you think I care about that?" Karen's eyes glowed fiercely, then softened. "Torch, what do you plan to do?"

"I'm ridin' out."

"You mean, you're turning yellow, running—just because a few people say it looks like you're crooked?"

The passionate intensity of her words startled him.

Then his lean jaw set.

"Mebbe that's as good a way as any to describe it!" he said.

"Then I'm glad I found it out. I'd marry a penniless man, Torch, if I loved him. But I'd never marry one who was a quitter and a coward!"

She turned abruptly into a store.

Torch Malone's bootheels thudded solidly as he strode into Sheriff Tom Norcross' office. In the office with the paunchy, gray little sheriff was Saul Cleghorn, who owned the big Spur outfit. Cleghorn, a tall, rather flashily-dressed man with thin dark features, faced Sheriff Norcross across a desk. He'd been talking to the sheriff, but now, as he saw Torch Malone enter, he abruptly became quiet.

Malone stopped spread-legged before him.

"Don't close up on my account," he said. "You were sayin' that I'm crooked as a pair of snakes fightin' in a cane patch—that I ought to be in jail with Bill Trevor. Ain't that right?"

"Not in so many words, I didn't." Cleghorn stood up. "But maybe that was the idea. I said somethin' smells rotten about you livin' with Bill Trevor three years and not knowin' he was a thief."

"Shut up, you two!" the sheriff said flatly. "You, Saul, put a hobble on yore tongue. The evidence didn't implicate the kid. And he didn't have to sell off all his cattle to pay for Bill Trevor's cussedness, did he?"

"I didn't get any of the money he passed out," Cleghorn declared. "His whole two-bit spread would hardly pay for the cattle I had stolen. But I'll get what's comin to me, Malone, even if I have to sue yuh to get yore outfit away from yuh."

"You won't have to sue me, Mister!" Torch Malone took a folded piece of paper from his pocket and slammed it on the desk before Cleghorn. "There's a deed and bill-of-sale to the L Dart, signed by Bill Trevor and me. You been wantin' it long enough—now it's yores!"

CLEGHORN grabbed up the piece of paper and read what was written on it. His eyes lighted greedily.

"Satisfied, Saul?" the sheriff asked.

"With my pay, yes," Cleghorn said sardonically. "But I'm still not convinced that Torch Malone ain't a crook. He's tryin' to—"

Malone hit him, all his bitter fury behind the blow. The punch smashed Cleghorn backward across the desk and over Tom Norcross, knocking them both to the floor. The paunchy old sheriff rolled over, swearing with pained surprise. Saul Cleghorn clawed his way to his feet, his black eyes wicked and rage-filled. He reached for his gun.

Torch Malone hurled himself headlong across the desk. The rancher squalled with alarm, then grunted as Malone's shoulder hit him and drove him backward again. They crashed to the floor.

Malone reared up instantly, clutching Cleghorn's shirtfront, dragging the man to his feet.

He hit Cleghorn—and this time when the dudish rancher went down, he didn't get up. Torch Malone whirled and started rapidly for the door.

"Wait a minute, younker," the sheriff called. "Where yuh goin'?"

"I aim to take me a little pasear!"

"Where to?"

"Anywhere," Torch Malone flung back, "just so it's away from this narrow-minded, two-bit town! I tried to be honest, and it lost me two hundred head of cattle and a ranch. Now I'll try the other way!"

He strode out, mounted his buckskin horse at a nearby rack, and rode furiously out of town.

A WEEK later, in a saloon in the mountain town of Skytooth, twenty miles to the north, Torch Malone sadly arrived at a conclusion. For four days and nights he had been trying earnestly to drink the bottoms out of assorted bottles. It hadn't helped, and now he knew he couldn't drink away what was on his mind. But he wasn't ready to stop trying.

The saloon, crowded with punchers, trapers and wild horse hunters from the hills, was noisy. Torch Malone regarded these men sourly. Bitter anger and resentment still rode him like a hawk, sinking its talons deep.

He hadn't wanted or tried to make any friends in Skytooth, having sought and found three fist fights since his arrival. Skytooth had begun to look upon him with a jaundiced eye.

Somebody sat down across the table from him.

Torch Malone looked up frowningly. His uninvited visitor was gaunt, shabbily dressed, with pale, meek-looking eyes peering from behind thick-lensed spectacles. The fellow looked sickly, and he was smiling uncertainly at Torch Malone.

"Yuh look lon'some, friend."

"I'm not lonesome," Malone said curtly.

"In trouble, then?"

"It's none of yore blasted bûsiness! What do yuh want?"

"Why, nothing, friend." The shabbily-dressed stranger looked hurt. "You seem like a stranger here, and so am I. I—I thought maybe I could buy yuh a drink, that's all."

"All right!" The carrot-topped youngster grinned twistedly. "Because the last one I had took my last dollar."

The meek-eyed stranger went to the bar and returned with two drinks.

Torch Malone downed his whisky at a quick gulp.

"Now yuh've bought me a drink," he said. "I'm not lon'some, not in trouble, and I don't want to have any company. Well, is that plain?"

The bespectacled man smiled, showing no resentment.

"Sure, that's plain. Well—so long, friend." He walked away.

A queer duck, Torch Malone thought. That gent was oddly out of place here in this tough, roistering crowd.

He sat there, darkly contemplating the future. Tomorrow, he would drift. It didn't matter where, because he was rootless and one place was like another. He had worked hard and stayed honest and it had brought him only bitter disappointment.

There was no wisdom, he reflected sourly, in trying it again.

He sat erect suddenly, his attention focused on a swirl of sound and movement at the bar. A man cursed. There was the fleshy-impact of a blow. Half a dozen men were milling and fighting near the bar. "It's him," somebody yelled. "Kill the dirty skunk!"

Torch Malone got up, jumped on the table so he could see. And at the center of the cursing, mauling men he saw—the skinny, pale-eyed man who had bought him a drink a few moments before!

The saloon toughs were hammering at the man with their fists. In a hand of one of the toughs was a clubbed gun. The bespectacled man had blood on his face. He was fighting back fiercely, but hopelessly, against the overwhelming odds. Before that savage assault, Malone knew, the meek-eyed man could not stand long.

The clubbed gun rose and fell. Malone saw the skinny man wilt down to the floor. Yelling and cursing with vicious triumph, the attackers surged in upon the fallen man, eager to tromp and further beat at him.

A quick, wild anger boiled through Torch Malone. He grabbed out his old range six-shooter.

"Get back, yuh dirty wolves," he yelled. "Touch him ag'in and I'll massacre the whole pack of yuh!"

CHAPTER II

Killer Plans

INSTANT silence possessed the room. The toughs turned from kicking and mauling the man on the floor. They looked at Torch Malone's lanky figure on the table, at the muzzle-weaving gun in his hand.

"Get back!" Torch called. "Get back! Let 'im get up!"

Slowly, sullenly, the crowd moved away from the fallen man. He was stunned, and blood was running from a cut above one eye, over his bony face. Clutching at the bar, he got to his feet.

"Yuh know who this Bucko is, younker?" somebody asked Malone.

"No!" Torch Malone flared. "And I don't give a blue holler! Get away from him, or I'll make air-holes through yuh. Where I come from, we don't gang up on a pore, sick pilgrim and tromp him into the floor!"

The gaunt man adjusted his spectacles and drew an old, bone-handled gun. He backed over to Malone.

"Thanks, friend," he murmured. "Let's get out of here!"

Malone jumped from the table and, side by side, guns weaving, he and the stranger backed to the batwings, thrust them open and ran into the street.

"What we runnin' for?" Malone protested. "If they're too many for us, we can—"

"Where's yore horse?"

"Right there at that rack."

"Mine's right across the street. Hit leather, kid, quick! Don't argue. Do as I say!"

The skinny man turned and ran across the shadowy street toward a bunch of horses at a tie-bar. Malone ran, but more slowly, toward his own buckskin. He was still a little dizzy, his mind fogged by the last four days of drinking. He came up to his horse, started untying him.

A gun roared, a streamer of flame lashing out from the saloon door, and a bullet snapped waspishly past Malone's head.

"There the snakes go!" a voice yelled. "Let 'em have it!"

Torch Malone needed no further urging. He leaped into the saddle and wheeled the plunging buckskin into the middle of the street. The skinny man was spurring out from the far side on a long-legged sorrel, and now a gun in his hand started blasting, the red fingers from its muzzle licking out toward the saloon.

"Come on—come on!" the man yelled at Malone.

The town had begun to boil with sound from one end to the other. Men ran into the street.

Malone put spurs to the buckskin and followed his new-found acquaintance in a wild, pounding ride. The two drove directly at the running, bewildered men, who scurried straight for shelter. Several guns started firing raggedly behind them, their explosions like lurid orange flowers blossoming in the night.

But almost instantly Malone and the stranger were out of the settlement, racing through the windy night toward the low mountain range rising darkly to the west.

They rode in silence. They both rode good horses, and if there was pursuit Malone never knew it.

Several miles from Skytooth, beside a little stream in the foothills, they paused to let their mounts drink and rest.

A full moon had broken through the clouds above, and in its pale light Torch Malone studied his companion. The man still looked sickly, but Malone knew it was an illusion. The fellow had fought like a trapped cougar back there in the saloon. But still his eyes did look kindly and meek.

"Friend, what's yore name?" Malone asked.

"Daw," the man said, and added earnestly, "kid, I sure owe yuh one for what yuh done. I'm obliged, and I'll pay yuh back if it takes from now on."

"I don't want any pay. My kettle's been stewin' for the last week, and it just b'iled over when I saw them toughs gang up on yuh. What started it?"

"What's yore name, kid?" Daw countered.

"Torch Malone."

Daw looked quickly at him.

"Torch Malone?" he murmured. "I've heard about you. Got part interest in an outfit down close to Lodestar, ain't yuh?"

"I did have, but not anymore. I've shook the dust of that lyin', filth-breathin' range from my boots. They couldn't beat me down with fists or guns, but they done it with their slimy tongues. And I took it. I been a purrin' tabby cat, but now I aim to be a yowlin' catamount with a burr under my tail!"

"Pity yuh didn't decide that a long time ago," Daw said. "Yuh'd have had more

sense than to get nabbed like Bill Trevor done."

Torch Malone looked at him sharply. "What the devil yuh know about Bill Trevor? You say yore name's Daw?"

"Yeah, Daw. Some folks call me Meek Sam."

Malone swore softly, fiercely. He grabbed Daw by the shirt-front and jerked him close, a quick and virulent anger running through him.

Daw didn't try to get loose or fight back. He looked at Malone with his pale, spiritless eyes.

SLOWLY, Malone lowered the fist he'd drawn back to smash into Daw's face. He grinned twistedly.

"Meek Sam Daw," he breathed. "Leader of the rustler gang Bill Trevor was mixed up with!"

"That's right, Torch," Meek Sam agreed gently. "Funny, us meetin' up like this, ain't it? It was a dirty deal Bill Trevor give you. Yuh say yuh lost the ranch?"

"Give it away, to pay for yore and Bill Trevor's crookedness!"

Daw gestured.

"Aw, now. That's a hard way to look at it. Trevor was a man full-growed, and responsible for what he done. Him and the two with him that night was careless, and got caught. You can't blame me for what Bill Trevor done."

"Maybe not," Malone conceded. "But, anyhow, how do yuh come to be here? This is over twenty miles from Lodestar."

"Me and my boys work all along the base of these mountains." Meek Sam grinned. "We've got—connections. Only I'm powerful short-handed right now. Look, kid—why don't yuh join up with me?"

"I got no use for rustlers and thieves!" Malone said bluntly.

Daw laughed.

"Men who was supposed to be honest didn't have any use for you either, did they?" he asked.

That was a fact, Torch realized. They'd sneered at him, and called him a thief behind his back. They'd the same as driven him into exile. Why not be what they had made him?

He grinned again, sardonically.

"Why not?" he said.

They remounted, and rode deeper into the timbered, canyon-slashed hills. After an hour's ride they came to a narrow, swiftly-flowing stream. They forded the stream, and rode into a little clearing that had a campfire. Packs and saddles lay on the ground, a pot of coffee simmered on the fire. But nobody was in sight.

"All right, boys," Meek Sam called.

In answer, two men came from the hemming thickets and into the red circle of firelight. They stood looking at Torch Malone, wary and suspicious.

"Boys, this is Torch Malone," Meek Sam said, swinging to the ground. "He was Bill Trevor's sidekick. Kid, these two are Red Burma and Tobe Schell."

Malone acknowledged the introduction with a curt nod. These two wore the tough brand of the out-trails. Tobe Schell was wiry and dark and catlike. Red Burma was burly, with a long, heavy-boned face bisected by a beaklike nose.

"Where's the Taos Kid?" Meek Sam asked casually.

Red Burma shrugged.

"He left yesterday," the burly outlaw said. "Said he was tired of doin' nothin', and that he aimed to have some fun. He headed for Lodestar. Ain't got back yet."

"I told everybody to stay here till I got back," Meek Sam murmured. He shrugged. said to Malone, "Well, light down, kid. Tobe, you take care of our broncs. Then I've got some news."

Torch Malone dismounted, and Schell led the two horses out of the clearing. Malone could hear a low, muted roar from downstream. In the bright moonlight, he saw that a hundred yards below the campsite the stream plunged between towering black walls.

Behind him, the mountains lifted dark and unfriendly.

Meek Sam poured coffee into two tin cups and gave one to Malone. Malone drank the black, bitter stuff with relish, and realized that he was ravenously hungry. He was glad when Red Burma tossed strips of fresh beef into a skillet and placed it on the fire. By the time Schell returned, a meal of beef and biscuit was ready.

The men ate in silence. Malone was inwardly surprised at the unquestioning way these three had accepted him. Maybe, he decided, they figured anybody who'd been a partner to Bill Trevor was bound to have some skunk about him. Meek Sam, soft-spoken almost to the point of shyness, laughed and joked with him. However, there was no warmth in either Schell or Burma.

"Boys, I got us a job for tomorrow night," Meek Sam said when the meal was finished.

"What kind of a job?" Schell asked.

"A big one. I talked to the Boss two nights ago. There's a gent down there with a good little outfit which the Boss has been crowdin' for some time. We been drivin' off some of this hombre's cattle, a few at a clip. But now the Boss wants the job finished. He wants that spread."

"How's he figger on gettin' it?"

"He's holdin' a mortgage against the outfit. But the feller has cows aplenty to sell and pay it off. That's what the feller is fixin' to do. He'll finish roundin' up the cows tomorrow, and tomorrow night he'll hold 'em—about a hundred-fifty head—in a pasture up close to the ranchhouse, ready to start the drive to Lodestar. The Boss don't want them cattle to reach the chutes."

"That's a pretty big order for three men," Schell grumbled. He scowled at Torch Malone. "Or four."

"We'll have help," Meek Sam said. "The Boss will be on hand with a bunch of his riders. They'll help us get the cattle into the hills. The Boss wants the cattle brought up here to our hideout, rebranded, then shoved back down onto the Boss' range. And the Boss ain't takin' any chances on this job. He aims to do it up brown as gravy. He aims to burn that ranchhouse down, and if the old man and the girl happen to be inside it, it'll suit him that much better!"

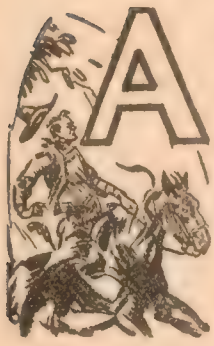
Torch Malone's head jerked up.

"Who does this outfit belong to?" he asked.

"Why, a gent named Dave Sands," Meek Sam said.

CHAPTER III

Escape from the Grave



A CLAMMY HAND seemed to touch Torch Malone's heart, then clutch tighter and tighter until it hurt. But he gave no sign.

"A thing like that is bad," he murmured.

"A lot of things are bad," Burma grunted, poking at the fire with a stick. "Cold feet already, kid?"

Malone fought his anger savagely. He shrugged, said nothing.

"They treated yuh like dirt down there at Lodestar," Meek Sam said. "This'll give yuh a chance to get partly even. Yuh'll have other chances, too. Saul Cleghorn stands by his friends!"

Malone lowered his gaze, staring into the fire, so that the three couldn't see what was in his eyes. So Saul Cleghorn was the big Boss of the rustler gang that had been plaguing the basin! Cleghorn who, hiding his mask of outraged piety, had squalled louder than anybody else about his losses. He hadn't lost any cattle. But, using that as an excuse, he'd taken Torch Malone's ranch. Stolen it!

The deep and wicked anger, which somehow had been burned out of Torch Malone by the whiskey he'd drunk in Skytooth, now returned and fogged his brain like a red haze. The voices of the three rustlers, as they talked over the coming raid, seemed far away. Dimly, Malone heard the roar of the river as it plunged between the canyon walls a short distance below. A thin mist was rising from the water, coiling like silvery snakes in the moonlight.

Momentarily, lost in his personal thoughts, Malone had forgotten what Cleghorn planned to do tomorrow night. Now it returned with a rush, slamming at him like a fist. The raid meant more than just wiping out Dave Sands' herd. Cleghorn, reckless in his arrogance, wasn't taking any chances on his scheme backfiring. He would make sure that Dave and Karen Sands were inside the ranchhouse when he burned it.

He knew suddenly what he had to do. He stirred, started to get up. Then he paused. Meek Sam, Schell and Burma had raised their heads and were listening.

A rider was on the far side of the river. There was a snatch of ribald song.

"It's me, boys," a thick voice called out then. "Li'l' ol' Taos Kid."

The rider, dark in the moonlight, spurred his mount into the stream and started across.

"Drunk as a fiddler crab," Schell murmured.

The Taos Kid spurred his dripping horse out of the river with a flourish, and into the firelight. He was a slender, dark youth, about Torch Malone's age. He was flashily-dressed, with cruel, bitter lines about his thin-lipped mouth. He was plainly drunk.

The Kid swung to the ground. He didn't seem to notice Malone. He stared owlishly at the three others.

"Been havin' me some fun," he announced loudly. "Got tired of hiber—hiber—of wallowin' about like a sick bear. Red, take care o' my bronc, will you?"

Nobody moved or spoke. The Taos Kid braced himself, head on one side, trying to

grasp the significance of their silence and their hostile faces.

"So what if I did ride into town and have a few drinks?" he said, with drunken belligerency. "A gent's got to have some fun, don't he?"

"Why, sure, Kid," Meek Sam said gently. "That's okay. Go put up yore bronc. We saved yuh some grub."

"That's more like it!" The Taos Kid laughed. He turned, weaving a little, and started to lead his horse away.

Meek Sam drew his gun, deliberately, and flame leaped out from its muzzle. The Taos Kid jerked to a halt, shivering, then sprawled forward on his face.

Calmly, Meek Sam ejected the spent shell and put in a fresh one.

"I don't like this game and I never will like it."

"You wanted to join up."

"I thought I did. Now I know different." Malone was on his feet now. He expected trouble, was ready for it. "I'm ridin' away from here, right now."

"I dunno," Schell said, scowling. "You know pretty close to where our hideout is. You saw the Taos Kid killed. I dunno."

"Shut up, Tobe," Meek Sam ordered sharply. "The kid done me a favor, and I said I'd repay him. If he wants to ride out, he can. Tobe, you go get the younker's bronc."

THE DARK little outlaw scowled again, started to speak, then got up and went

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"I told him to stay here," he said, without emotion.

He raised his eyes then and looked across the fire at Torch Malone. And Malone saw that his eyes weren't meek or kindly now. They were wholly cruel and wicked, like the eyes of a hungry cougar.

Cold shock from Meek Sam's brutal act left Malone motionless and silent for a moment. He felt numb, and a little sick. Very likely the Taos Kid had himself been a conscienceless killer. But it was hard for Malone to realize that Meek Sam had deliberately murdered a man in cold blood.

Now he knew the true, wolfish nature of this sick-looking, meek-appearing little man —of Schell and Burma—and he knew their ways could never be his.

"Why'd yuh do that?" he asked.

"Because he was a thick-headed fool," Meek Sam murmured. "What about it?"

"Nothin'. Only I'm cuttin' loose!"

"What's wrong, kid?" Meek Sam asked.

toward where the horses were tethered nearby.

"What yuh aim to do, younker?" Meek Sam asked Malone.

Torch Malone shrugged.

"I just aim to cross this river and keep on ridin'."

Malone waited for Meek Sam to pin him down to something more specific. But Meek Sam lapsed into silence, and a moment later Schell led Malone's buckskin into the firelight.

Torch Malone swung into the saddle, never taking his eyes from the three. Inwardly, he was amazed at them letting go of him so easily.

Meek Sam lifted his hand.

"Well, so long, kid," he said. "If I can ever help yuh, just let me know."

Malone lifted his own hand and, still half-turned in the saddle, put the buckskin into the stream. The chill water lapped about the horse's flanks.

Then the buckskin hit a hole, came up snorting and pawing the water to a froth, and started swimming.

By then the animal was almost in the middle of the stream.

Malone turned and looked over his shoulder. The three rustlers stood motionless on the bank, in the moonlight, with thin tendrils of mist curling about them. Meek Sam had a gun in his hand—and the gun was pointed straight at Torch Malone!

In Malone's mind, the stark certainty that Meek Sam aimed to kill him, as he'd killed the Taos Kid, caused him to fling himself sidewise, trying to put the horse between himself and the gun.

He didn't make it.

A lance of fire seemed to slash at his side. He didn't remember falling, but suddenly he was in the water.

He felt numb, weak, and dull pain throbbed in his side.

He felt the current pull him under, roll him over and over. He struck out blindly. And, when his lungs seemed about to burst, his head popped above the surface and he gulped in great mouthfuls of air.

He couldn't see the three rustlers now, but he could hear their shots, their blasting guns. He could hear the angry snarl of bullets as they cut into the water about him.

Bitter rage hammered at him. But he'd lost his gun, and there was nothing he could do to return the fire.

Desperately, Torch Malone's questing eyes sought shelter. Fifty feet downstream, a row of black, fanglike rocks ripped the water's surface.

A hundred feet beyond the rocks, the stream narrowed abruptly and plunged between towering black walls.

Filling his lungs with air, he dived. Under water, he struck out frantically. Just when his brain began to fog, he bumped into something hard and clawed up its slippery side to the surface. He huddled there, gasping for breath.

He had the rocks between him and the three killers. But they would be looking for him, to finish the job. He started easing downstream, clutching at the slippery rocks. He reached the end of the line of boulders, and paused, resting, looking at the spot a hundred feet away where the leaping white water plunged with a furious roar between gaping walls.

He couldn't go back, or to either side.

"You canyon catfish get ready for a full meal," he muttered. "Here I come!"

He let his numbed fingers slip from the rock. He went under, let the strong current jerk him along until he had to come up for air. He bumped into something that sent savage pain through his side. He went under again, and when he came up now he was between dripping black walls.

He didn't try to swim. He just tried to keep his head above water long enough to snatch gulps of air. A drumming roar hammered at his ears. He didn't know how long the canyon was, but he knew that even if he could reach the sheer walls on either side, he couldn't scale them.

For what seemed like ages, the current slammed Torch Malone violently along, sucking him under, hammering him against unseen obstacles, tumbling him over and over. His strength left him. A mist clouded his brain, and his whole body felt numb, paralyzed.

Long after he quit feeling or hearing anything, he knew he was still fighting the river.

When he regained consciousness, he was lying face down, his legs still dangling in the water, on a narrow rock ledge beside the river.

He didn't know how he'd got there.

When he rolled over, and sat up, pain smashed at his head and body. He saw that it was daylight. Through the heavy mist that lay along the river he could see that the ledge where he sat was less than fifty feet from the lower mouth of the canyon. It was a moment before he could piece together in his mind what had happened.

He glimpsed the sun through a rift in the mist, and saw that it was almost midmorning. The killers, then, hadn't come searching for him. They'd figured that, if their bullets hadn't got him, the river had. By some miracle he'd escaped both. The bullet wound in his side was ugly, was still bleeding, but it would not be serious if he could get it attended to.

But something kept worrying Torch Malone's mind. Then he remembered. Tonight, Dave Sands' ranch would be raided. The raiders would strike, like wolves in the dark, and a man and a slender, dark-eyed girl would die—unless they had warning.

Malone got slowly to his feet. It took him a long time to climb the thirty-foot embankment behind the ledge. Then he started walking.

The nearest ranch, he figured, was about ten miles away—a little outfit belonging to Lute Redman.

It would take even a well man a long time to walk that far. But Torch Malone knew he had to do it.

CHAPTER IV

Guns in the Dark

ON LEAVING the river, the mist thinned, and the sun became white and hot. Torch Malone's feet were blistered before he'd gone a mile. But he didn't notice that. The slopes were rough, slashed by pits and ravines. He had to be wholly intent on what he was doing, to stay on his feet and keep going. On and on.

The blazing sun reached the zenith, started the lower half of its arc. Malone's side, his head and feet—all his body hurt. He came to a little stream and quenched his thirst and had to fight himself to his feet again. He wasn't quite sure when he reached the edge of the hills. But it was after dark, and the moon was coming up out of the east.

He paused a moment to rest and get his bearings. Maybe he was too late, he thought despairingly. He didn't know what time Cleghorn, Meek Sam and the others would strike—just some time tonight, Meek Sam had said.

Malone got up and stumbled on again. Lute Redman's little outfit was only a couple of miles over behind a curving slope. He was burningly thirsty again. It seemed to take him an incredibly long time to climb the slope. Then the friendly orange glow of light from the ranchhouse he saw below appeared very close.

He reeled down the slope, trying to run. Several times he fell, rolled, got up and stumbled on. He heard the sharp, alarmed barking of a dog—and, a moment later, a man's querulous voice

"You, Jonah," the voice called at the dog. "What'n tophet's wrong with you?"

The dog's dark shape came bounding and snarling at Malone, followed more slowly and cautiously by Lute Redman's bulky figure.

Redman had a gun in his hand.

"You, there," he called out now, with sudden sharpness. "What's goin' on? Speak up—speak up!"

"Me, Lute—Torch Malone!" Malone tried to say, and knew he must have, for Redman came quickly up to him, peering at him, kicking at the dog. Then Redman swore, put out a huge arm to steady Malone, and helped him toward the house.

"What is it, Lute?" a woman's voice called from the doorway. "What's happened?"

"Torch Malone—he's been hurt, looks like!"

Redman tried to help Malone into the house, but Malone pulled loose and sat down on the doorstep.

"Water—" he said thickly.

The rancher ran to a nearby well and brought a brimming pail of cold water. Torch Malone drank deeply, feeling fresh strength and life flow through his feverish body. Redman was firing questions at him.

"Lute," Malone said. "I want to borrow a horse and a gun."

"Sure—sure! But where yuh been. What's happened?"

"I got no time to tell the whole story now," Malone said tautly. "What I want yuh to do is ride into town, fast as yuh can, and get Sheriff Norcross and a big bunch of men together. A gang of rustlers aim to raid Dave Sands' place tonight. They aim to wipe out Dave's herd, burn the ranchhouse, kill Dave and Karen if they can. Saul Cleghorn's at the bottom of it. He's the leader of the rustler gang that's nearly ruined the basin."

"C-Cleghorn?" the rancher spluttered. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. No time to tell yuh why—but I'm sure. Hurry, man, or we may be too late. A horse and gun for me—then you fog into town and get a posse together."

"But what yuh aim to do?"

"Hurry, Lute—do what he says," the calm voice of Redman's wife cut in from the shadows. "Except I'll saddle him a horse. You head for Lodestar."

Redman turned and ran toward the barn nearby.

"You're hurt, ain't you?" the woman said to Malone. "Come into the house and let me see."

Torch Malone protested.

"I've got to—" he began.

"There's little you could do alone," she answered. "Anyhow, a bandage and a few minutes rest, and some liniment, will do you good."

She was a tall, strong young woman. She helped Malone into the ranchhouse and onto a bed. And just then they heard the wild drum of Redman's horse as he rode away.

She heated water, cut away Malone's bloodsoaked shirt, bathed and bandaged his wound and doused it with horse liniment—all within a space of ten minutes.

She took a belt and gun from a drawer and placed them on the bed.

"Lie here," she said to Malone, "while I saddle a horse."

She went out. It seemed only a moment before she called Malone outside. She was holding a saddled horse, a big dun.

Torch Malone felt much stronger now, and he was driven by a fierce impatience as he pulled himself into the saddle and spurred away from Redman's place. Redman should be halfway to Lodestar by now, Malone knew. Lodestar was closer than Dave Sands' Running W outfit, which meant that Sheriff Norcross' posse should reach the Running W almost as quickly as he, Torch Malone, could.

He put the dun at a steady pace, not riding too fast because the hard jolting hurt his side.

A strong, cool wind was blowing.

Malone's racing horse cast a grotesque shadow behind, as if he were being pursued by a phantom rider. As Malone drew in toward the Running W he kept straining his ears for the sound of gunfire, his eyes for a red glow against the sky.

A MILE from the ranch buildings, Torch Malone heard the first staccato drum of gunfire. The shots came from his left, from the direction of the fenced pasture where he knew Dave Sands would be holding his herd overnight. He saw the red flares of exploding guns off there, like tiny bruises in the half-dark.

He drove the dun straight ahead, toward the ranchhouse. Sands' two riders would be guarding the herd. Sands, or Karen at least, would be at the ranch.

The cluster of buildings loomed suddenly before him in the moonlight. He slammed straight at them. At first, they seemed wholly dark and quiet and deserted. Then he saw a glow of light in a window. Four saddled horses were standing before the main building. The figure of a man moved along the base of the building's nearest wall.

Then Malone heard the quick, terror-filled scream of a woman.

He dragged the dun to a halt and tumbled to the ground. Now he saw that the man moving along the base of the wall had a can, or pail, in his hand, from which he was pouring something. The acrid scent of kerosene stung Malone's nostrils.

Wickedly angry, he grabbed out his gun and fired. The man yelled, dropped the can, whirled and stood half-crouched, peering at Malone. Malone fired again, and the man lunged suddenly forward, sprawling full-length on his stomach. From that position he fired, the bullet snapping angrily past Malone's ear.

Then Torch Malone fired again, deliberately. He saw the man's body jar, and the raider fought almost to his knees before he pitched heavily forward on his face. Then Malone saw it was Red Burma.

Another man had run around a corner of the house. Torch Malone slammed a shot at him, and this second raider yelled and lunged back around the corner. Without bothering further with him, Malone ran to the house. Inside the house he heard startled voices, and boot-thuds.

Malone thrust fresh cartridges into his hot gun as he leaped across the porch and through the open front door into a hallway. Lamplight came from the open doorway of a room near the far end of the hallway. That room was Karen Sands' bedroom, Malone knew. Loud voices came from there.

A man ran suddenly out of the room into the hallway. It was Meek Sam Daw, and he had a gun in his hand. Daw peered along the corridor, at Malone's shadowy, leaping figure.

"That you, Red?" he called out. "What is it? What's happenin' out there?"

Torch Malone fired at him, but just then he stumbled over some object in the shadows, and it spoiled his aim. Meek Sam Daw yelled, ducked back into the room and slammed the door.

Malone knew this house. He swerved, darted through a doorway into a room which he knew connected with Karen's bedroom. The connecting door was shut. He lunged recklessly across the dark room, found the doorknob, and kicked the door open.

Instantly, with photographic clearness, the scene stamped itself on Torch Malone's brain. Four people were in the room: Meek Sam Daw, Saul Cleghorn, Dave and Karen Sands.

Meek Sam had his back turned, facing the door he'd just slammed. Cleghorn had obviously been tying Karen to the chair in which she sat. Dave Sands lay on the floor, motionless, a rivulet of blood running over his gray face.

Plainly, Meek Sam and Cleghorn hadn't been watching this side door, and Malone's entrance knocked them off-balance for an instant. Meek Sam whirled, bringing up his gun, stark surprise on his thin face as he saw Torch Malone. His hand seemed to waver for the fraction of a second, and that was fatal, for Malone shot him and saw him slam back against the door and wilt to the floor.

Cleghorn raised his gun, deliberately, a cold and wicked fury in his black eyes. Despairingly, Karen's scream ringing in his ears, Malone dived wildly forward, his own gun held ahead of him and at an upward angle.

Cleghorn's gun blazed almost in Malone's face. Malone was blinded by its flash, and by the pain from his wounded side as he hit the floor. But he fired, blindly and doggedly, emptying his gun at the spot where the Spur man had stood.

When he could see again, Cleghorn wasn't there. He was on the floor, sprawled across Meek Sam's body.

Karen had tossed aside the loosely-wound ropes that had held her to the chair. She was on the floor beside Malone, cradling his head on her lap, crying and asking if he were badly hurt.

"Shucks, no." He sat up dizzily. "I'm fit as a bass fiddle. But Dave—is he—?"

"Not badly hurt, I think," she declared. "Cleghorn hit him with a gun-barrel when he tried to fight back. They aimed to—"

"Yeah, I know. But that's all over now. Saul Cleghorn was the boss rustler. I reckon I'll get back my ranch."

"And maybe the cattle you gave away to pay for somebody else's crookedness," Karen said swiftly. "After tonight, there won't be any doubt in folks' mind about you being honest. You'll have a home. We'll get—"

She broke off, listening. There was a wild thud of hoofs in the night as several horses slithered to a halt outside. Sheriff Tom Norcross led half a dozen grim-eyed possemen into the house, guns in hand. They looked amazedly about the room.

"We saved Dave's herd," the sheriff said. "It was a bunch of Cleghorn's spur riders tryin' to steal 'em. We captured some of 'em, some stopped lead, but a few of the snakes got away."

"Just the tail-end of the snake got away, sheriff," Torch Malone said grimly. "Here's its head, and its fangs have been plumb pulled!"

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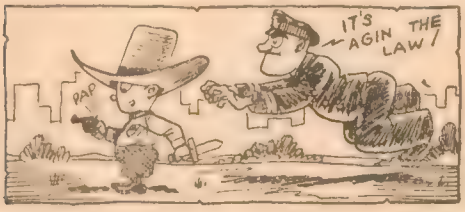
(Continued from page 6)

Doc Brown has saved the most spectacular plant on the desert. So here's a Western hero that performed great deeds, not with a six-gun but a squirt gun! A hunk of modern history that ought to be included in Mister Rollins' library at Princeton. A weapon loaded not with gunpowder but bug powder!

No Cap Pistols

Here's a funny one, hombres and hombresses, that comes from Oklahoma, the home of gun-toters. The sale of toy cap pistols has been outlawed in Tulsa. Why? Fire hazard.

But hither and yon Western folks still hanker for excitement in the style of pioneer tradition, and try to find it in gambling. I'm



a poor hand myownself to wager anything more'n a guess on tomorrow's weather, so it's hard for me to understand why folks will gamble. But, anyway, Nevada has a reputation for sinfulness by legalizing gambling in public. About the only difference between Nevada and some neighboring States, however, is that in Nevada gambling is open and aboveboard, while it's done on the hush elsewhere. Reform, I guess, takes lots of time.

A Luxurious Night Spot

Not far from my winter campspot, in a lonely setting inhabited only by jackrabbits, coyotes and sidewinders, there rose a few years back a luxurious night spot that attracted rich and world-famous folks. The place did a big business for awhile. Then Internal Revenue agents got curious. One night came a raid. Cards and gambling paraphernalia were scattered to the desert winds.

Scattered also were the elite and fashionable clients, never to return to the deep, rich carpets, the glittering fixtures, the soft music and swank, uniformed attendants. For the glamorous Dunes Club was closed and stayed closed.

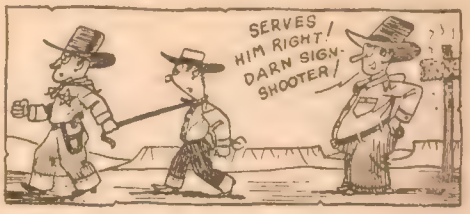
For awhile after that, the deserted premises were a prowling place for mischievous small boys and for vandals who looted and destroyed the expensive furnishings.

Then one night, here right recent, flames leaped. Nobody knows how the fire started. But all that's left now of the Dunes Club is a heap of cindery ashes in a 10-acre patch of wind-driven silt hemmed in by singed tamarix trees.

There Ought to Be a Law

There's talk through the Western States of making it a prison offense to shoot or otherwise mar highway signs. It's a good idea and I'd be plenty pleased if it becomes a law.

All my days I've lived in hopes of catching a low-down miscreant in the act of shooting a road sign. There's a $25 reward in most



localities for informing authorities so they can arrest culprits.

Senseless destruction of this sort sometimes has serious consequences. Roads fork miles from anywhere in many unsettled regions, where taking the wrong route can mean hardship or even mortal danger to the stranger. A bullet that blasts away the mileage or place name might as well be aimed at the traveler himself.

If you Home Corralers ever see, or can furnish proof of somebody making a target of a road sign, report immediately to the nearest law officer.

There's another breed of law violators that are getting swift justice, I'm mighty pleased to note in a recent report from California's fish and game authorities. Out of 360 cases of game laws violation, 334 resulted in convictions and fines amounting to $11,155. That was only one month's haul. One hunter paid $125 for shooting three pheasants out of season. For catching salmon out of season a fisherman was fined $250.

Trout on the Increase

I keep in pretty close touch with matters that concern outdoor life, as you regular readers of POPULAR WESTERN Magazine know. I have optimistic news from fish culturists in nine of the Western States to the effect that trout hatching and planting is making a big increase.

This upped activity in sport prospects is due largely to the return of trained workers from war service. Also, scientific investigations have developed control of some unseen trout enemies—parasites and such.

Great strides are being made also in learning ways to promote the growth of fish by increasing the food supply. Certain chemicals stimulate aquatic plant growth that is host to water-hatched insects that trout live on.

In this way, lakes and streams can be made to support a larger, faster-growing fish population. And to furnish enjoyment to more fishermen.

If you Home Corralers have any special questions to ask on this subject, write in with your letters. I'll answer 'em as they come, with the latest dope.

Nature's Balance

I came onto a curious piece of fishology

down here on the desert the other day. It is a mighty impressive demonstration of how Nature preserves a balance among living creatures.

The story really starts nearly forty years ago, when the lower Colorado flooded and formed the immense Salton Sea. Along about that time came a friend of mine, the late Captain Davis, who settled on a spot he named Mullet Island.

I've told you folks about Cap Davis before—how he traced the wanderings of the lost Donner Party of early days in the high Sierra and found relics that marked the tragic finish of some lost immigrants.

Anyhow, Cap Davis made him a desert home down on Salton Sea and named his place

Mullet Island because he shipped in some Florida mullet and planted 'em there.

They took hold and flourished. Now these mullet can't be caught on hook and line, on account of they're not bait feeders but live on under-water vegetation. But they're fine, flavorful food fish. So along when wartime meat shortage was at its worst, seiners got

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busy in some of the Salton Sea sloughs and shipped mullet to market.

But it happened to be illegal to seine inland fish (although this was a body of salt water) and the law didn't make any distinction but halted operations and confiscated the nets.

Too Many Fish

So the mullet multiplied, unhindered by man. Until they became too numerous for their environment. Few days back I paseared to a place called Date Palm Beach. You boys who trained at Camp Young, Desert Center, under "Blood and Guts" Patton remember the spot. Used to be as many as 10,000 of you in swimming there at one time—a temporary wilderness Coney Island, it was.

Well, there on the shore dead mullet were piled up by the thousands. Big, fat mullet, five pounds and up. What was destroying 'em?

A dark-tanned youngster was clearing the beach of dead fish and loading 'em in a trailer to haul away. I asked him, to start off with, if he was a native to those parts.

"Not me," he laughed. "I never knew there was such a spot till I came here as a soldier, in desert training in 1942. But I liked it and

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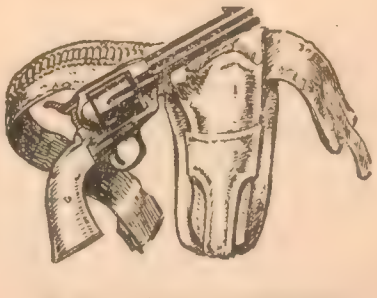

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swore I'd come back when I was discharged. So here I am. About these dead fish, I've opened and examined 'em by the hundred. Nothing wrong that I can see. They're just dying because there's too many of 'em. The other day a school went past and it was so big it made a wave like a passing ship. Shame, ain't it? Enough fish here to feed a big city. Going to waste, except these I haul away for fertilizer."

I recollected then a yarn that ol' Cap Davis used to tell. He aimed to use the mullet for fertilizer when they got numerous.

"Only trouble," he told me, "is that they grow so gosh-darned big here in Salton Sea that they can't be loaded onto a railroad flat car."

That's all for now, folks! See you again.

—DOC LONG TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

WHEN men who have been good friends quarrel their feeling of bitterness toward each other is likely to be greater than that of those who have always been enemies. Such is the case in BOOTHILL BROTHERHOOD, the tensely dramatic novelet by Larry A. Harris featured in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN.

Friendships have a strange way of snapping, like a rope that is drawn too taut. Only in the case of Jeff Connor and Big Ike Taggert the rope was around the neck of a brockle-faced heifer. The brush-poppers of

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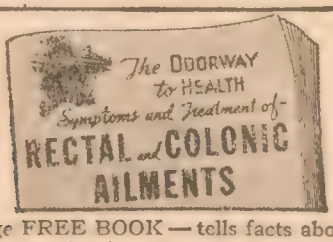

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both men's big outfits were returning from the chuck wagon when it happened. Neither Jeff Connor nor Ike Taggert had paused for coffee since dreary dawn. They were dog tired—their nerves were ragged.

Both men and their outfits were working their roundups together. Each had his own branding fire and crew. For years they had worked together, like brothers, lending help, sharing hay during the winters, giving more than either expected in return. It was an ideal friendship. Both men were honest as the day is long. Either would give you the shirt off his back, or shoot you if you tried to steal it.

That fateful morning, Jeff Connor, astride his sorrel cutting pony, dragged a bawling heifer up to his branding fire. Big Ike jogged up, dust smeared and grim.

"Makin' a mistake there, ain't yuh, Jim?" he asked.

Jeff Connor was off his horse, piggin strings in hand.

"What do yuh mean, Ike?" he snapped.

"Nothin' much, Jeff. Only the mammy of that heifer happens to wear my Bent T brand. She's weaned, shore, but if yuh'll cut her loose I'll gamble she'll still trail with an ear-notched roan of mine."

Fire suddenly leaped into Jeff Connor's eyes.

"I ain't askin' for ary cow that ain't mine, Ike. I remember this brockle face when her Tomahawk mammy was stuck in a bog this spring. I'm slappin' my brand on her and

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shovin' her over in my herd. I don't like bein' accused of stealin', Ike."

"I'm just sayin' she's mine, Jeff."

"Ike, yuh're a sneakin' liar!" Connor said hotly.

Both men were white with anger. One word from the other men who listened might have broken the tension and brought both cowmen to their senses. But none came. Both Ike Taggert and Jeff Connor would live to regret this day. Normally either man would have gladly given the other this ten dollar heifer.

Big Ike Taggert didn't fight, bellow or swear. Rage flamed through him, flamed and burned deep. He turned to his staring men, eyes bloodshot from fatigue, his voice cold as ice.

"We'll work alone from here out, boys. Split the herd. Brand our stuff and turn loose any critter that wears Connor's iron. I never figgered I'd live to see the day when there'd be bald-faced thievin' in Mustang Valley."

With that Ike Taggert whirled his horse and rode off. The taut rope of friendship had snapped over a brockle-faced heifer, worth ten dollars.

Jeff Connors found his son Toby and told

(Turn page)

Next Issue's

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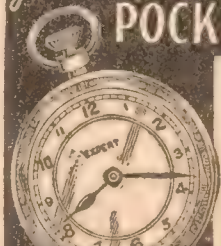

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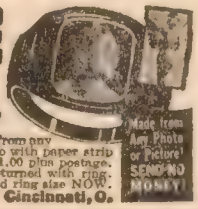

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him what had happened. The quarrel between the two ranch owners was the start of a bitter range feud. Guns roared and men died before Toby Connors finally battled his way through to force a final showdown and reveal the men who were deliberately keeping the range war going. BOOTHILL BROTHERHOOD is a novelet that packs plenty of suspense and action from start to finish! You'll enjoy every bit of it.

Sheriff Blue Steele and his deputy, Shorty Watts, find a jail break leads them on a strange trail in MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, the exciting Painted Post novelet by Tom Gunn which is also in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN.

When the little deputy whitewashed the Painted Post jail, he didn't expect that the unexciting job would uncover a mystery and lead to one of the most thrilling adventures in the spectacular career he shared with the two-gun sheriff, but it did. Shorty found a bundle of hacksaw blades hidden in a crack of a cell wall and part of the barred cage-front of the cell sawed almost through.

"My gosh," Shorty croaked. "Some culprit stashed these here, and cut the bars figgerin' on a jail-break. Now who—when—"

The deputy rushed to tell Sheriff Blue Steele the news, but quite a lot happened before Shorty Watts learned the reason for that prepared jail-break. MIDDLE OF NOWHERE is a yarn that has nicely blended mystery and quick-shooting action!

Another winner among the featured novelets in the next issue is RIDER OUTLAWED, by Stephen Payne. Trouble just seems to come in bunches for Lefty Arp when he is run off the range as a thief and killer, and a desperate outlaw pack bars the way to clearing his name. But Lefty Arp has plenty of savvy and courage and he uses his own methods to prove he is honest. How he does so makes RIDER OUTLAWED a splendid yarn.

There will also be a number of short Western yarns in the next issue, each and every one of them exciting stories of the range-

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land, and Doc Long Trail will be right in the saddle with another interesting talk in THE HOME CORRAL. So be on hand, everybody!

OUR LETTER BOX

WHICH stories did you like best in this and other issues of POPULAR WESTERN, and which did not appeal to you? Write and tell us your opinions! We are always delighted to hear from our readers, for your letters and postcards help us plan future issues in keeping with your reading tastes and requirements.

Here are excerpts from just a few of the many letters which we are constantly receiving:

Just finished the May issue of POPULAR WESTERN and sure did enjoy it. I liked THE HIGH-PEAKED BLACK HAT, by Stephen Payne, BUZZARDS FLY SOUTH, by Tom Gunn—those Painted Post stories are always my favorites—and A TEXAN RIDES MONTANA, by Gunnison Steele, was good too. I also liked the short stories. Keep up the fine work. —*William Carson, Denver, Colo.*

Thanks for your letter, Bill. Thanks for naming the stories and authors you like best.

I just read the March issue of POPULAR WESTERN. I think it is wonderful. PHANTOM STAGECOACH was good. I also liked LAST OF THE GUN TRIBE. Buffalo Billy Bates was fair, all the others were good. Oh, yes, can't forget THE HOME CORRAL —I enjoyed reading it.—*Leonard Doucet, West Bathhurst, New Brunswick, Canada.*

Well, I'll just light a smoke and we'll talk. Reckon you don't know my handle but it doesn't make no dif. Let me tell you though, feller, if a better book was ever published it still couldn't beat POPULAR WESTERN—I don't reckon. I know it is swell. I read 'em all the time.—*James O. Smith, Circle Box J Cattle Ranch, Orban, Idaho.*

That's mighty nice of yuh, pardner, to say all them there nice things about POPULAR WESTERN, Jim. Thanks for writing.

Though I am a girl, I enjoy reading POPULAR WESTERN. I have read many books but I enjoy this magazine the most. I like especially the Sheriff Blue Steele novelets and A RIVAL OF BILLY THE KID. In fact I like all the stories.—*Mary Cage, Covington, Tenn.*

We'll quote excerpts from many more letters in future issues—so keep them rolling in! But whether we quote your letter or not, you may be sure we'll read it carefully and take all your comments, criticism and suggestions into account. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. See you all next issue—and thanks to all of you.

—THE EDITOR.

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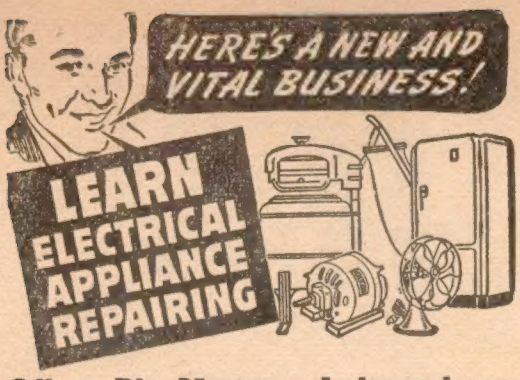

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